



THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

THE  
SNOWY  
FOOTPRINTS

AN ELVES AND  
THE SHOEMAKER RETELLING  
ABIGAIL MANNING

The Christmas Chronicles

# The Snowy Footprints

A Retelling of The Elves and the Shoemaker

Abigail Manning

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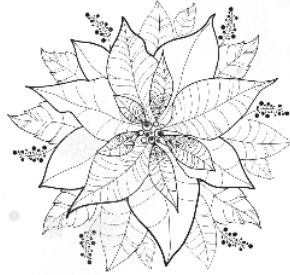
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*For my daughter,  
the best Christmas gift I've ever received.*

## Prologue



It was too sunny out for a funeral. Out of all the gifts that the villagers could bring, sunshine was not one I would have requested. The world felt grey, the sun felt cold, and the gifts were all lifeless in comparison to the magic my mother had once brought to our lives.

But still, I smiled.

One by one, the local townsfolk stepped up to the gravestone to pay their respects with a display of their magic. Louisa was the one who made it sunny. She meant well, but I missed the dreary atmosphere. There was nothing sunny about today.

After Louisa came Richard, the farmer who had a gift for taming animals. He left me with a basket of eggs and a fresh spool of wool, then took a turn looking upon Mother's grave.

"She'll be missed," he said, removing his worn straw hat. "Her and her gift. No flowers will ever be as beautiful as the ones she grew."

I bit my lip to keep it from quivering, barely managing a teary-eyed nod. Her flower shop had brought so much joy to our village, and now the flowers were as withered as my heart.

I glanced at my palms, wondering if my gift would ever be useful again. Making things more vibrant and beautiful was only useful if you had something to enhance; without Mother's flowers, what beauty was left?

*Nothing. There's nothing left to find beauty in.*

Tears trickled down my cheeks as I silently smiled at each attendee. One by one, they performed acts with their gift or provided me with items that stemmed from their magic. Usually the extended family of the deceased would go first, but that rule didn't apply when there wasn't any left. I knew I should have been grateful for the gifts, but I just wanted it to end. There was only so much a nineteen-year-old orphan could bear.

"What's he doing here?" A whisper caught my attention from the back of the crowd, and I blinked back the blur from my tears to focus. "How is he meant to pay his respects if he has no gift?"

*No gift? Is it...?*

“So it’s true? He was really born with no gift?” Another voice, shrill enough that I could identify it as Louisa’s.

“Not a lick of magic in his blood, I hear,” an old woman huffed, not even bothering to lower her voice.

*He’s here? But why...?*

Out from the gossip crowd pushed a tall, well-built, twenty-year-old man with hair the same shade as a toasted chestnut and skin tanned from long days in the sun. His piercing green eyes found me immediately, and I shied away from his gaze before he could see how red my eyes had become.

Emmett Sutterington, the giftless man I had teased mercilessly when we were children, stepped up to my mother’s grave with a look that was heavier than the ache in my heart. Unlike the other attendees, he said nothing. He didn’t tell me how powerful his gift was, how much effort had gone into the presentation, or even how sorry he was for my loss. He simply reached into his tattered coat and pulled out a cherry-red flower with petals in the shape of a star that had already begun to wilt.

My breath caught in the back of my throat, getting clogged by more tears that wanted to push through. I recognized that flower...it was always Mother’s favorite. What was it called again?

“A half-dead flower?” another voice from the crowd whispered. “Is he joking? What a crude thing to do!”

“Is he trying to poke fun at the dead florist?”

“Despicable! Someone should tell him to leave.”

But no one did. They only watched with scathing eyes as Emmett placed the crumpled flower in front of the gravestone. He lifted his eyes to meet mine, and this time, I didn’t look away.

“If you ever need anything, Evalie,” he said in a low voice that was as thick and sweet as freshly tapped syrup, “you know where to find me. I’m here for you.”

He backed away, both of us ignoring the judgmental grumbles from the other villagers as he disappeared back into the crowd. The cold air chapped my lips as I realized my mouth had been hanging slightly open. He may have been the only person here who was familiar with the pain I was enduring.

My veins buzzed as the first tingle of magic I’d felt in days warmed my blood. Perhaps my gift wasn’t gone after all. I looked down at the wilted flower and directed my gift to fill it with life.

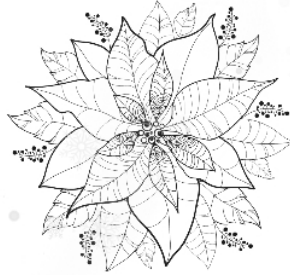
The petals stretched out and deepened in color, and the leaves uncurled and flourished like the bloom had just opened. It was just an illusion, and it would only last a few days at most, but sometimes, believing in things that weren’t real was easier.

“Look at that. At least she made his rude gift worth something.” The crowd stirred again, sinking their teeth into Emmett’s flower in any way they could. Except there was one man who wasn’t joining them...one with dark hair and soft amber eyes standing in the back of the crowd. He seemed to be viewing the flower in the same way I did, with a sad but reminiscent smile on his own chapped lips.

I didn’t recognize the man, but when I brushed the stray tears from my eyes to get a better look, he was already gone.

The rest of the funeral went by in a blur. There were more gifts, condolences, and magic, but none lived up to the beauty and sentiment of the star-shaped bloom.

## Chapter One



Two coins left. After today, I was going to starve.

I curled my frosty fingers around the dull copper coins, wishing I had a gift that could multiply objects. The warmth of my gift flooded my veins and encircled the coins, but when I uncurled my fingers, all the magic had done was make them appear shiny and new.

“Useless, yet again,” I sighed as I pocketed the polished copper. I’d done everything I could to stretch the savings Mother had left behind, but there wasn’t much to go around from the start, and winter was the worst time of year to be short on coins. Four weeks was the longest I could make it last with the rising costs of food and kindling.

It was getting colder by the minute now that the last of the fire had burnt out. I used to love having such a large home that doubled as a business, but with the business failing, it was only more space to heat. The wide windows in the front of the old flower shop let in loads of natural light that helped warm the space, but sadly, the glass was too thin to insulate against the growing cold. I tugged on my longest cotton stockings, then layered my wool socks overtop. The winter snow was coming in quickly, and the frosty air threatened to freeze me solid in my home.

I needed more kindling, but if I wanted to buy food, I couldn’t afford both.

The bare pantry mocked me. An empty potato bag sat at the bottom of the dusty closet, with only a few tempting crumbs from an old bread loaf remaining on the shelves. My stomach gurgled at me, demanding I prioritize its protests over the trembling in my cold bones. I had to choose something. One last comfort before I wasted away and joined my mother.

My shoulders tensed as I caught a glimpse of her abandoned flower pots in the window. Their emptiness reflected the hole left in my heart by Mother’s absence. Winter used to be the best time of year for our business. Mother’s gift allowed her to grow the most spectacular flowers any time of year, which made our shop the focal point for anyone hunting for decorations for the Day of Giving. I loved watching her magic blossom, filling our home with the sweet scents of roses, lilies, and lavender. Back then, my gift had been useful. After she sprouted the blooms, I would use my gift to make them dazzle like stars stolen from the night sky that had been dipped in the colors of dawn.



But what use was my gift now? No amount of my magic could transform a weed into a bloom worthy of the villagers' coins.

My stomach growled again, and my teeth clattered together so violently I nearly strained my jaw. Sitting here and staring at the pots wouldn't make anything grow. I tossed on my cloak and stepped out into the brutal cold. Goosebumps immediately spotted my arms, and my nose stung like an icicle had pricked it.

The thought of spending my last coins on firewood was becoming more tempting by the second, but there was always a chance I could scavenge some kindling in the pine forest. Food wouldn't be so easy. My stomach growled in agreement.

The chill hastened my pace. My home and failed business were located in the corner of the village square, so it only took a few steps before my boots made contact with the icy cobblestone. A light dusting of snow coated the road like powdered sugar over a biscuit, barely marking the footprints of everyone who passed over it.

I kept my head down so the snow flurries couldn't sneak down my neck or bodice. The center of the square was usually decorated by now to honor the Day of Giving, but it was far too cold to stand around and gawk. Instead, I hurried straight for the general store, two doors down from my own shop.

The shop's windows were completely frosted over, streaked with veins of icy white. I tried to peer inside to see if it was busy or not, but it was impossible to see through, even from up close.

*Is he working today? Who am I kidding; when is he not working?*

Unwilling to endure the cold any longer, I stepped inside the store, causing the tiny silver bell in the doorway to jingle. A delightful rush of warmth brushed my senses. A toasty iron furnace loaded with glowing coals burned in the shop's back corner, heating the space like hot cross buns in a baker's oven. I tugged my hood back, taking in the lines of neatly organized shelves that were stuffed with all the things I couldn't afford.

"Morning, Miss Makera." Nigel, the shopkeeper, waved from behind a shelf of various grains. His spectacles slid halfway down his nose, but his spindly arms were too occupied carrying a bag of flour to push them back up. "Good to see you. May I help you find something?"

"No, thank you. You seem to have your hands full already." I laughed as I watched the tall bean-pole of a man struggling with the massive bag. Nigel was an excellent businessman, much like my mother had been with her flower shop, but he wasn't the type of man you'd expect to see doing hard labor. That was usually they kind of thing that—

"Emmett! Why don't you give me a hand with this?" Nigel called, causing me to jump just lightly enough that I could have blamed it on a shiver.

*I knew it. He's always working when I need to stop by.*

Two seconds later, Emmett popped out from the back room, carrying yet another large bag of grain. I couldn't see his face from behind the massive bag, but there was no denying those tanned, sturdy arms that poked out from his rolled-up sleeves.

"On my way, boss!" Emmett called from around the bag, his deep voice muffled behind it.

I looked back at the door, wondering if it was too late to make a run for it before Emmett saw me. We hadn't spoken since my mother's funeral, and I still wasn't sure what to say to him. Our relationship had always been centered on teasing, insults, and a general dislike for each other. What he did at the funeral broke every one of our unspoken rules.

*"If you ever need anything, Evalie...I'm here for you."*

My stomach growled again, this time loud enough that I couldn't ignore its pleas. Emmett could be here all day. I couldn't wait for him to go home this time. Maybe I could just ignore him?

"Evalie?" Emmett's smooth voice cut through my thoughts like a warm knife through butter. He dropped the bag of grain on the floor with a thump and stared at me from the side while simultaneously taking Nigel's load from him. "What a surprise."

"Emmett, careful!" Nigel warned as Emmett absentmindedly let the bag slip from his fingers, nearly crushing his boss in the process.

"Oops! Sorry!" Emmett steadied himself, snapping his focus back to the task at hand before he could lose his grip again. "Got a little distracted by our customer."

"I know what you were *distracted* by," Nigel smirked at him with a wipe of his brow, earning a sharp scowl from Emmett. "Why don't you set those bags down and help Miss Makera find what she's looking for, and I'll get some new price tags written up."

"Uh, that won't be necessary—" I reached out my hand to stop the shopkeeper, but those long legs made him quick. He disappeared into the backroom in three short strides, leaving me alone in the shop with Emmett.

He set down the second bag, letting out a brief grunt as the sack of grain smacked against the wood floors. He rose to his full height, his broad shoulders towering over the shelves as those prominent green eyes pinned me in place. I didn't say anything; I just stood there as awkwardly as a duck in a turtle pond as I waited for him to dust his hands on his apron and walk around the shelves to approach me.

"What can I do for you, Evalie?" he asked in such a polite tone that I wasn't sure if it was purely because he was actively working. "I'm happy to help."

I cast my gaze toward his boots, finding them far more interesting than his direct eye contact. "That's all right, Emmett. You don't need to help me."

*You couldn't possibly want anything to do with me.*

"It's really no trouble," he said, once again in an unbelievably polite voice. "Are you looking for flower seeds? We have quite a few already in stock." He pointed toward the shelf to his left, showcasing rows of little brown packets labeled with seed descriptions.

"Emmett, really. You don't have to bother." I stuffed my hands into my cloak pockets.

"Bother?" Emmett lifted a brow. "You're no bother. Truly, if there's any way I can help—"

"Emmett, enough!" I snapped at him in a sharp whisper, my eyes burning as unfamiliar tears crept into the corners. What was I doing? Why was I getting so worked up over this? "I'm sorry, I mean... I don't need— You don't want... I just..."

What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I talk to him?

I bit my lip to keep it from quivering, my heart pounding so fast in my chest it was warming me more efficiently than the shop's furnace. Emmett was only being nice, and here I was, being cruel to him all over again. I met his eyes, expecting to see some sort of wound from the thoughtless wielding of my tongue, but when I looked up, he didn't look offended in the slightest. He had to be faking. There was no way I hadn't made this worse.

"I—I'm sorry." I turned back for the door. "I should go—"

"Evalie, wait." Emmett touched my arm, my skin jolting before he ever-so-gently withdrew his hand. "Please, don't go just yet."

I paused, my heart still racing like mad as I slowly turned back around to face the man I'd mocked for years. "Why?" I asked, my words a mere breath on my lips, burning with the question I'd been dying to ask for weeks. "Why did you come?"

"Pardon?" He blinked at me.

"To my mother's burial," I clarified. "You came, and you even brought a gift..."

Emmett nodded, his hands clasping together as we revisited that terrible day's memories. Out of all the people I had expected to see in that crowd, the giftless boy from down the road was not one of them.

"Why wouldn't I come?" he asked softly, his voice growing quiet as if he already knew my answer. "Look, Evalie, I know... I know you don't necessarily like me. Most people in this village don't, after all. But that doesn't mean you should have to endure what you did alone. I know what it's like to lose family, which is why I meant it when I said I'm always here for you."

He'd meant that?

"Th—thank you, Emmett," I said as I reached for a stray strand of my red curls. The words felt foreign as they left my lips. Had I ever thanked Emmett for anything before? "I appreciate that."

"Emmett?" He gave me a half-smile. "Did I just hear you call me by my real name? Whatever happened to Magicless-Mett? Or No-gift Gorgon?"

I bit back a smile, wondering if those nicknames had always sounded that ridiculous. "To be fair, you called me Evalie first. As opposed to curly-top, spitfire —"

"Gingersnap." Emmett winked, effectively stirring the fire that had earned me the previous title. I glared at him, and he laughed warmly in return. "There's the spoiled princess I know. I'd rather you insult me any day as opposed to... Well, I guess I just missed seeing you, Gingersnap."

He'd...missed me?

"Don't let it go to your head..." I scuffed my boot across the ground. "But I think I missed you too, Killjoy."

"Killjoy? That's a new one."

"Well, the Day of Giving is meant to be the most joyful time of the season. You can't give gifts. So..."

"Ah, I am a killer of joy. Clever." He rolled his eyes, and I was a little relieved to see him looking annoyed again. That was how our relationship was meant to be: just two irritants brushing against each other. "But to be fair, you can give a gift without magic."

Memories of his flower fluttered through my thoughts. He was right, but that wasn't what the Day of Giving was about. At its core, it was about flaunting your magic to your closest friends and family. It was a stressful season for those who didn't have flashy gifts or had families with high standards, but for others, it was more personal. Mother and I had always decorated our home with dazzling flowers to celebrate, then baked cookies and sipped spiced drinks by the fire until we felt sick to our stomachs. It was wonderful, but there were no flowers now, and my gift was as useless as an empty box with a silver bow.

My focus drifted toward the shelf of seed packets, and just like the seeds, a thought was itching to sprout inside me as I let my gaze linger. Mother's flowers were gone forever, but that didn't mean it had to be a lifeless Day of Giving.

Maybe I could replace part of what I was missing.

"How much are the seed packets?" I asked Emmett, cutting off a ramble he was on about gifts and, I think, baking.

"Oh, these?" Emmett pointed to the shelf. "The out-of-season ones are one silver coin, but this one is only two copper coins." He plucked a packet off the shelf, and I instantly recognized the sketch of the dark-red flower with star-shaped petals on the front. "They grow rather well this time of year. I certainly had luck with one." He smiled, and I felt my cheeks flush crimson as the petals.

There he went, being all nice again...

The two coins in my pocket felt heavier as I looked at the seed packet. There were only a few weeks left before the Day of Giving. Would the flower even bloom in time? I knew so little about how flowers grew in nature. All I ever knew was how they functioned with Mother's gift; she never even had to use seeds.

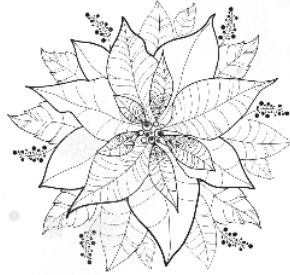
My stomach clenched, reminding me that those two coins had been intended for bread. I was meant to be spending them on my last meal.

But maybe it would be better to spend them on one last moment instead.

I could have one final Day of Giving, complete with a flower I could decorate with my gift in Mother's memory. That was worth more than one less day of hunger.

"I'll take it."

## Chapter Two



I tried to distract myself from the fact that I had just spent my last two coins on a pack of seeds that may never grow. For hours, I wandered around the forest on the outskirts of the village, gathering as many sticks and branches as I could. Most were drenched from the snow or already half-rotted, but a few pine branches had warded off the moisture well enough.

After gathering as much as I could, I trudged home through the growing layer of snow. My ankles ached from stamping around in the cold, and I was half-convinced that my nose was ready to fall off by the time I arrived home. Stepping inside brought little relief to my trembling bones since the empty fireplace did nothing but bring in a chilly draft.

I dropped the pile of sticks by the fire and started sorting out the ones that seemed most likely to light. The shaking in my fingers never seemed to let up, even as I got my blood pumping. I struck a match on the side of the stone hearth, then took a moment to let my fingers linger over the tiny flame and soak in the warmth.

The flames jumped to the scrap of newspaper I held to it, filling the room with a rush of inky smoke. I placed the paper into the fireplace and silently pleaded for it to catch on the twigs. I bit my lip as I watched the flames lick at the pine twigs, snapping the sap inside them with a sound like popping corn. A few tense moments later, the fire spread, lifting my spirits so high they nearly floated up the chimney with the smoke.

I tossed in a few more twigs, and soon enough, the room was warm and filled with the smell of burning pine. The heat was weak compared to Nigel's toasty shop, but it was enough to finally make my fingers stop trembling. The cold still lingered deep in my bones, but enough moving around should be able to fight off the worst of it.

And I knew just what to do next.

I reached into my cloak pocket, pulling out the fist-sized bag Emmett had wrapped my seeds inside. I'd told him the seed pack was fine for me to carry on its own, but he had insisted on keeping it wrapped up to stay dry. At the time it had seemed annoying, but now I was glad to have the extra paper to start more fires.

The bag settled in my palm, and it was then that I finally realized it felt heavier than just a pack of seeds. Did Emmett...?

I dumped out the bag's contents onto the kitchen table, and the seed pack skittered across the surface, followed by the soft *plop* of something wrapped in wax paper. The odd lump was no bigger than an apple, with strange bumps poking out and nearly tearing the paper. Curiosity got the better of me, and I unwrapped the strange parcel, finding the strangest lump of bread I'd ever seen, along with a note written on the inside of the paper.

*Not all gifts come from magic. I hope you enjoy the fruit cake.*

"Fruit cake?" I ogled at the strange treat that looked nothing like fruit or cake. "Did Emmett make this himself?"

I gave the cake a sniff, and a mixture of cinnamon, nutmeg, and an outrageous amount of sweetness immediately greeted my senses. Typically, such flavors wouldn't be my favorite, but the gurgle of approval in my stomach seemed happy with anything that I might fill it with.

I took a small taste of the cake, and decided it tasted exactly like it smelled, but more overpowering. It was soft, chewy, firm, crunchy, and dry all at once. The flavors blended together like a patchwork quilt that looked terrible but was at least warm. Once I'd gotten past the first bite, I determined it was better than eating nothing but snow.

I devoured the rest of the cake, and soon, my stomach was filled with a lump of sugar and other unidentifiable ingredients.

It was probably the most bizarre thing I had ever eaten, but it calmed the roaring in my stomach, making it the best meal I could have imagined. I let out a nearly content sigh. The house was getting warmer, my stomach was filled, and I may even enjoy one last Day of Giving.

I picked up the seed packet that had slid across the table and studied the sketch of the flower on the brown paper. I wanted to make it bloom like that, even for just a day. I'd never hear Mother's voice again, never feel her touch or see her smile, but with any luck, I might feel her magic in this house one final time.

*Who knows, maybe I can sell the flower after the holiday and pay for another meal.*

I tried not to think about how long it would be before I even had a chance at making another coin. The fruit cake sat heavier in my stomach the more the thought prodded me, and I tried to enjoy my fullness for every second I could.

The seeds spilled into my palm one at a time. I grabbed one of Mother's favorite flower pots from the front of the store and shifted the old dirt around inside it. I wasn't sure what specific conditions this flower required, but if Emmett could grow one, surely I could too. Right?

My nerves tingled as I dug a tiny hole in the center of the pot's soil. What if I messed it up? What if I was forever waiting on a flower that would never bloom?

*Like waiting on a mother to come home who never does?*

My heart hammered more than any person's ever should while planting seeds. There were three total, but knowing my luck, only one would germinate, so I planted them all together. I dropped the tiny black seeds into the hole and covered them up as delicately as if it were a blanket over a cradle. I watered the seeds generously, then pushed the pot into the sunniest part of the window so it had the best chance of thriving.

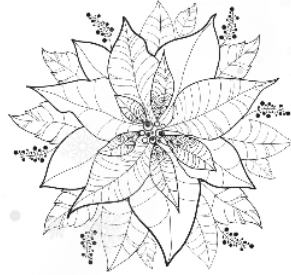
For a while, I just waited. I sat in front of the window the same way I had done the day Mother left to see the doctor. I had hoped so hard for a miracle that day, but my hoping did nothing more than fill the silence as I waited eternally. I don't remember how long I sat that day, and I don't remember how long I watched the pot of seeds, but both times, I never made it to my bed.

My eyes drifted closed, my stomach already aching again with new hunger. As I settled in, a soft wish played in my mind, etched on my heart as I whispered it into the smokey air.

"I wish I had a miracle about now."

I lay down with a blanket on the thin woven rug by the fire and fell asleep to the sound of my door hinge squeaking.

## Chapter Three



*Did I hear something?*

It was one of those dreams where you can't tell if it's actually happening or if you're still asleep. A cool draft brushed my nose, the slow squeak of the door screeched in the back of my mind, and most realistically of all, the thump of footsteps jolted the floor beneath me.

The smart thing to do would have been to jerk myself awake and investigate. Though...it had been so long since I was warm and full, so *smart things* were far less appealing than enjoying my cozy slumber. It was likely just a dream anyway, and if by chance it wasn't, there wasn't even a crumb in the kitchen for an intruder to steal.

I nuzzled into a ball on the rug, my skin and hair scented by the fire's smoke. It wasn't until the fire burned out and the heat faded that I finally roused to life. My back ached from lying on the floor, tensing the nerves in my neck as I stretched my arms. The house was getting cold again. Did I have enough kindling to start another fire?

The bliss from my cozy sleep disappeared with every painful reality of my situation. My stomach grumbled the second I sat up, and the biting cold forced my teeth to chatter. The air stung my skin, and I debated curling back up in the warm spot I'd left on the rug, but if I lay still for too long, I risked succumbing to frostbite.

*I can't freeze yet. I have to make it to the Day of Giving, just one last time. I want to remember what that speck of joy feels like.*

My heart stung like someone had scraped a blade against the tender wound inside. Who was I kidding? The Day of Giving would never be the same without Mother. Plus, the chances of surviving long enough to see the day weren't looking good. It was only a few weeks away, but those weeks seemed endless when you had nothing left to survive on.

I had no food, no fire, and no money—only a pot of planted seeds that I may or may not live long enough to see bloom.

I looked back at the empty flower pot, wondering if I could at least imagine a flower in its soil. My breath caught. It was easier to imagine than I thought. In the



center of the pot was the most beautiful flower, standing tall and in perfect health. In fact, it was so vivid that, for a moment, I thought my gift was acting up and providing me with a magical illusion. It wouldn't be the first time it had flared to life without me noticing.

*Except that's not magic.*

I approached the flower, my eyes wider than its bursting petals.

*It's...it's real.*

The thick green stem sprouted directly from the soil I had seeded only yesterday. I touched a petal, nearly jumping when my fingertip brushed the velvety surface. If touching it wasn't enough to convince my mind that it was real, the subtle floral scent mixed with undertones of pine did. I clasped a hand over my mouth, catching my jaw before it could crash to the floor.

"But...but how?" I blinked. "I planted you yesterday. Did you...?"

*The sounds from last night.*

I snapped my attention to the painted green door, my heart hammering as I recalled the creaking of the hinges. Had someone come in last night? Nothing looked amiss inside the house. The seed packet was exactly where I'd left it; even the remaining twigs I had collected were left untouched. I threw open the door, inspecting the surrounding area for any signs of an intrusion, but there was only one problem...

*Snow.*

A fresh blanket of white coated the ground in at least a three—inch layer. Soft flurries dusted down from above, acting as the perfect cover-up for any footprints that may have been left behind. If anyone had been here, their tracks were already well covered.

*That is, if anyone was here at all.*

I stepped back inside, not bothering to close the door since the interior was already freezing. The fresh air tingled against my skin, reminding me this wasn't a dream. I inspected the flower, studying every inch like I expected it to talk and tell me where it came from.

It was as if it had grown overnight...like Mother's magic used to do.

"I don't understand," I whispered. "She's gone, so how are you here?"

Was this the miracle I'd wished for?

My gift surged in my veins, tensing my muscles like a blocked pump spigot bursting to flow freely. I took a long breath, settling the magic into a low simmer as I reached out and pinched my fingers around the thick stem.

Within seconds, my gift began to cloak the bloom in a vibrant glamour. A rich emerald-green spread up the stem, brightening the already healthy stalk and spreading to the very tips of the leaves. The magic seeped up into the flower's pistil next, turning the yellow center into a glittering gold that looked like it had been shaved from the stars. The rich red petals took on a velvety appearance, looking soft enough to upholster a queen's pillow. The magic finished its work, applying one final glossy shine to the entire plant as if dipped in wax.

I lowered my hand, my blood still warm from the rushing magic and my heart beating as I took in the stunning new look of the flower. It didn't even look real. It was like someone had ripped a sculpture from an artist's mind and forced all the beauty of the heavens to forge it into what was before me now.

“Oh my...” An unexpected voice echoed behind me, nearly startling me out of my stockings.

I whirled around, half stumbling into the line of flower pots when I saw none other than Lady Hollyn, the wife of the village lord. It was then that I remembered I had left the door open. This was still a shop, after all. She must have wandered in thinking I had something for sale.

“L-lady Hollyn.” I dipped into an awkward curtsy, unsure how to properly greet a lady. “What a pleasure to have you visit—”

“That flower.” She skipped the formalities and pointed at the magically-enhanced bloom. “How much is it? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I, uh...” All thoughts escaped me at once. *Sell it?* I hadn’t even considered it. The flower was meant to be my last memory of Mother, to make it through the Day of Giving. But if I sold it...

My stomach grumbled as if translating the rest of my thoughts before I could waste any more time thinking it over. I straightened my spine, smoothed the wrinkles in my skirt, and tried to smile like I hadn’t slept on the rug and probably had cinders in my hair.

“This? You have quite the eye, Lady Hollyn. This bloom is the first of the season and will surely be coveted by all who lay eyes on it.” I ran my finger across the petal, causing a dusting of gold glitter to shower from the pistils. The lady’s eyes sparkled as she traced her gaze over the glitzy bloom. “But for you, I would be willing to sell it for only one silver coin.”

I bit my cheek behind my smile, praying I hadn’t overshot her price range. Mother used to sell her blooms for no more than three copper coins; a silver coin was worth seven more coppers than that.

“One silver coin?” She arched her tweezed brow, and I held my breath until a wide smile spanned her lips. “What a steal! I’ll take it! I’m hosting a holiday banquet tonight, and this will be the perfect centerpiece for my table. Don’t you agree?”

“Y-yes!” I barely got the word out, still dazed by how easily she was to sell to. “It will be perfect. Allow me to get it packaged up for you!”

I felt like I was vibrating, but I was too excited to calm down. A whole silver coin! I could buy an entire bag of potatoes *and* a bundle of firewood with that! Or maybe I could buy some bread and fresh milk!

I practically glowed from the inside out as I scrambled around the shop to find the flower clippers and some old newsprint to wrap the bloom in. I located the clippers, returned to the flower that may have extended my lifespan, and hovered the sharp blades around the stem.

“Thank you,” I whispered into the petals, snipping it free from the pot. I still didn’t have the foggiest idea of where it came from or how it had grown so quickly, but I wasn’t about to question my miracle. I bundled up the flower’s stem, careful not to bend any petals, and then exchanged the bloom for my precious silver coin.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Lady Hollyn.” I dipped into another curtsy, feeling far too joyful to care if it was proper.

“You as well, my dear! I look forward to seeing what you have next season!” She winked at me, and I laughed at the irony of it all. There would be no next season. There wasn’t even supposed to be a today. Yet somehow, somehow, I’d

made a sale that would get me through another night.

I looked at the shiny silver coin in my palm, brushing my fingers across the top over and over until it was warm. Like the flower, it was real, but I still couldn't explain how either had come to be.

*Except there was those footsteps last night... Emmett grew a flower like this once, didn't he?*

"Evalie?" As if by fate, a new voice stepped into the shop, but I recognized the owner this time without looking up. I also recognized the smell...was that more fruit cake?

"Emmett?" I pocketed the coin. He stepped inside, his cheeks and nose rosy from the cold and his hands filled with a wrapped hunk of what must have been another cake. "What are you doing here?"

"I was on my way to work and thought I'd stop in," he said as casually as if he always made the effort to visit me. "Did you find the fruit cake in your bag?"

"Ah, so that was the poison you tried to feed me?" I crossed my arms with a smirk.

"You figured out it was poison? Drat." He snapped his fingers. "I had hoped to bamboozle you for a bit longer."

I rolled my eyes. At least he was still acting like himself. "What do you want Emmett?"

"Isn't it obvious, Gingersnap? I brought you more poison!" He held up the wrapped cake. "I can't stop baking this weird cake thing, and there's no one else I want to be rid of. It only made sense to give it to you."

"Funny."

"I like to think so." He smiled.

"You think? Oh, is that why you have a new wrinkle?" I scrunched my nose and pointed to his brow. "Would you look at that, your first mark of wisdom!"

"No need to be jealous." He snorted. "Not everyone gets to be smart *and* charming."

"Oh? And which one are you?"

"Well, it would seem I charmed you into trying my baking yesterday." He pointed at the discarded paper I had foolishly left out on the table. "Perhaps I can use my charms to convince you to have some more." He set the fresh baked goodie on the table, not even waiting for me to refuse or accept it.

I rolled my eyes but didn't argue. Today may have been a good day, but I still wasn't in a position where I could comfortably deny food, no matter how strange it was.

"You know this is a shop, not a garbage bin, right?" I teased. "But if you insist on dropping off your questionable baking, I can dispose of it for you. For a price, of course..."

"Price?" Emmett leaned back on his heel, running his tongue across his white teeth before biting it with an amused smile. That smile always got a rise out of me. It always made him look like he was acting superior, which was laughable, considering he had no magic. "You do realize how gifts work, right? I gave you something out of the goodwill of my heart and expect nothing in return. I shouldn't be required to pay you for the gift that *I* brought."

“Consider it a favor then.”

“Does that mean I get to ask a favor in return?”

“No, I’m taking your cake, aren’t I?”

“Again...not how gifts work.”

“I just need you to bring me something from the shop.” I pulled out the silver coin, and Emmett’s emerald eyes widened. “Three packs of seeds and a loaf of bread. I’d go myself, but I have... something else I need to pick up.”

*Like more twigs from the forest if I don’t want to freeze.*

“Whoah! Where did you get the coin?” Emmett asked. “Did you rob a spinster?”

“No!”

“An orphan?”

“No! And why do you assume I’d rob only old ladies and children!?”

“Excuse me, I’m an orphan, and I’m not a child.”

“I know, I said old ladies, too.”

He opened his big mouth to argue again, but I silenced him by thrusting the coin into his palm. He glared at me but still accepted it with the same submissive irritation I’d displayed when taking his fruit cake. I often couldn’t stand this man but knew I could rely on him. It was difficult to explain how that worked, but he seemed to understand the terms of our relationship well enough.

“Three seeds and a loaf of bread, correct?” He pocketed the coin. “Are you sure you need that many seeds? What about the one you just bought yesterday?”

I looked back at the flower pot that now only possessed the remaining stump from the flower’s stem.

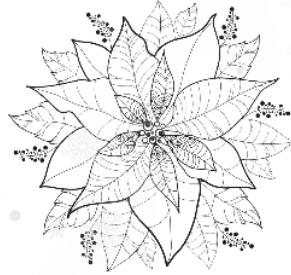
“About that...”

He followed my gaze, and a slow realization swept over him as he studied the fresh stem. The look of shock on his face was too real to be faked, letting me believe that he truly didn’t know about the flower. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, like a fish gasping for air before finally muttering something.

“Wait... is that...?” He looked between the stem and the coin, blinking so fast I thought he had dust in his eyes.

“Three seeds, please,” I repeated. “I need to test something.”

## Chapter Four



Emmett probably would have prodded me all day if he hadn't already been late for work. He promised to stop by with my order before sundown then rushed out the door. He kept my silver coin tucked safely in his pocket and left behind his supposedly fresh fruit cake.

My stomach grumbled like a symphony of snorting rhinos buried in my gut. I didn't want to eat the chewy cake again...not because it was distinctly bad, but because Emmett was planning on returning. If he saw that I'd consumed his baking *twice*, he might actually think that I appreciated him or something.

I did, of course. But I couldn't let him know that if I planned to maintain our prickly relationship. It was easier being picked on than pitied. Emmett seemed to understand that, which was why he'd welcomed my teasing when we were children.

*His station in life was too easily pitied.*

Even so, the cake tempted me. I may have sent Emmett off with money for bread, but I didn't have enough for butter or jam. I could always toast a few slices over the fire, but the pine tree sticks I was using would probably give it a weird, sappy flavor. I bit my lip as the memory of the cake's taste lingered in my mouth. It had at least been filling... Maybe just a little bite.

I unwrapped the cake and took a seat at the table. It should have been easy to take a little nibble and walk away, but it also should have been easy to cut a little slice and hide the evidence. However, I quickly discovered that it was *incredibly* easy to snarf down the entire cake and lick the crumbs off the paper...

*Darn you, Emmett, and your tasty poison.*

I tossed the paper wrapping and swept up the rest of the crumbs. It would be easier to hunt for kindling with a fueled body, and admittedly, my mind felt clearer now that my immediate needs had been met.

My focus shifted to the empty flower pots I had planned to fill today, and I started to wonder if I had made the right decision investing most of my coins into more seeds. It had seemed like a wise decision at the moment, but now...

"Will you flower again?" I asked the pot as if it commonly spoke back to me. "How did you even do it the first time? Are you enchanted? Did someone's gift enhance the seeds?"

I studied the pot, flipping it from all angles to look for anything out of the ordinary. It looked no different than when it held Mother's blooms, so how had the flower sprouted so quickly?

*Maybe it wasn't something in the pot...*

The door stood open, letting in the crisp air and occasional snow flurries. There was no lock on the door. There had never been a need for one since we only sold inexpensive flowers that Mother grew on demand. I never really worried about security in such a small town, but there had been those footsteps in my dream...

The thought of someone breaking in while I slept wasn't as scary as it should have been, mostly because I couldn't convince myself that it had happened. Why would anyone break in to leave something behind?

The questions plagued me as I gathered my boots and cloak to start my day of hunting down kindling. Sitting around and wondering wouldn't bring me any answers, but planting more seeds might. Seeds that were just like yesterday's...

*Seeds from Nigel's general store.*

.....  
"Welcome to Nigel's— h! Miss Makera, it's you. Come on in!" Nigel ushered me into the toasty shop. "Emmett said you had a delivery requested for today."

"Yes, that's why I'm here," I said with a stiff smile, my cheeks still numb from the cold. "I decided to brave the cold and come pick up the items myself."

*And to inspect what I was buying.*

"Brave, indeed!" Nigel laughed. "Emmett is in the back counting inventory. Why don't you defrost by the furnace while I ask him about that order."

"Don't mind if I do, thank you." I shuffled over to the furnace, stamping my frozen toes on the ground to regain feeling in them.

The blazing furnace felt like pure bliss as I thawed before it. The smell of dried herbs, tea, and bread filled the shop, giving the space a cozy feel. I often wished that Nigel had space for a second employee. The shop was always so welcoming and warm, but even if I managed to secure a position, I'd have to work alongside Emmett, and things were already complicated enough between us.

"Well, well, well, couldn't keep away from me, could you?" Emmett stepped out from the back, his irritating smile twitching his lips up. He balanced a neatly wrapped package in his arms, complete with shimmery gold paper and a dark-red bow. "I even went to the effort of wrapping up your order for you."

"That was me, you pesky little fibber." Nigel smacked him on the back of his head with just enough force to knock his smile loose. "You're not the one with a gift that creates perfect packages."

"No, but I asked the man who has that gift to use it," Emmett argued as he rubbed the back of his head. "Therefore, in a roundabout way, yes, I did wrap it."

"I have one ridiculous gift, boy." Nigel laughed. "Let me take credit for it when I can. You know you'd do the same."

"I don't know. I have a feeling I'd be more of the humble type."

Nigel and I burst into laughter, earning a dramatic eye roll from Emmett.

"Remind me why I went to the effort to do your shopping again?" Emmett thrust the package into my arms, and the smell of the fresh bread inside wafted up

through the holes punched in the top.

“Because you’re just that humble,” I said with a smirk. “And because you wanted an excuse to stop by my house again. It’s a good thing I figured out your devious schemes before you could enact them.”

“Devious?” Emmett placed an offended hand over the heart he claimed to have. “Says the girl who robbed orphans and the elderly to come up with a silver coin.”

“What?” Nigel poked his head up from behind one of the shelves he’d wandered behind.

“You’ve got to stop that,” I scolded Emmett. “I didn’t rob anyone. I earned those coins by selling a miracle flower.”

“Miracle flower?” Nigel rejoined the conversation with an amused chuckle. “What in the winter is that?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I’m hoping to find out,” I said with a pat of the package. “All I know is that I planted a seed last night, and it was fully bloomed this morning. I’d certainly call that a miracle, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d call it delirium,” Nigel chuckled as he returned to sorting his shelves of goods. “Evalie, it sounds like you’re imagining your Mother’s old magic. She grew flowers, didn’t she? I never met her but passed her shop often.”

I curled my fingers around the box, trying to ignore the sting that came from the mention of my mother’s gift.

“Yes, but—”

“Sounds like grief is running your imagination wild,” Nigel said as bluntly as a smack to the face. “Flowers don’t sprout overnight.”

“This one did,” Emmett said, his bold voice startling Nigel and me as he countered his boss. “I saw the stem left behind, and Evalie only bought the seeds yesterday.”

What was he sticking up for me for? He should have loved the opportunity to call me crazy.

“Ah, so I’m the one selling these miracle seeds?” Nigel pulled off his glasses, wiping them off and holding them up to the shelf of seed packets with narrowed eyes. “Well, golly! If I had known, I’d have doubled the price! But I’ll let you have them for a steal because I’m so nice.” He winked at me, but his goodwill didn’t impress me.

“Call me crazy all you want, but remember whose coin is in your pocket today,” I said in an icy voice, turning back toward the door. “It didn’t come from nowhere.”

“True, but neither did that flower,” Nigel chuckled under his breath, boiling my blood hotter than his furnace.

“Nigel,” Emmett hissed, his voice shockingly abrasive for someone speaking to his employer. “That’s enough.”

“Lighten up. It’s all in good fun,” Nigel said, his cheerful tone scratching at me like annoying brambles as I pulled open the door. “Evalie knows that she’s talking nonsense. No one else has a gift to grow plants like that.”

Maybe not, but I’d said it was from a miracle, not a gift.

“Good day, gentlemen.” I flicked my head around, smacking my springy red curls against my cheeks. “I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll need more seeds after I sell tomorrow’s flowers.”

Nigel grinned like I had told the joke of the century, and Emmett gave me a ridiculous look of pity. I stormed out of the shop, stomping all the way home through the fresh snow. This morning may have been a miracle, but that didn’t mean it would be the only one.

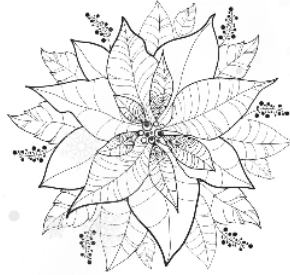
When I got home, I stuffed the seeds into pots, angrily wishing over each one that it would blossom into a flower I could shove into Nigel’s smug face. I wasn’t crazy. I wasn’t grief-stricken. I was gifted, but not by myself.

*Please grow again... Show them you’re real.*

I don’t know who I was wishing to. It could have been a nameless enchantment, a wishing star, or even a thief in the night, but when I shut my eyes to sleep, I didn’t stir when I heard the footsteps inside.



## Chapter Five



*Someone was here.*

I sat up from the floor, flinging flecks of ash around my face as it was tossed out of my hair. The fireplace still had a few smoldering chunks of wood at the bottom, and the draft from the chimney was sweeping the sparks into the room. I was pretty sure that wasn't supposed to happen, but I barely had enough resources for a little fire, let alone a full chimney sweep.

I brushed the remaining bits of white ash off of my face and scrambled to my feet to refocus. Last night, there had been footsteps, hadn't there?

It was such a vague memory, like the thin smoke of a fire that may or may not be truly burning. The first light of day blinded me through the window, forcing my eyelids to slit until my pupils adjusted. The sun was rich and golden, reflecting off the pure white snow with a blaring glow. It took a few blinks for me to get my vision settled, but when my eyes finally adjusted, I could see the trail of fresh footprints in the white—footprints and something red standing tall in front of the window.

"Flowers!" I gasped so hard I nearly choked. "They're back, I knew it!"

Three bursting blooms were lined up in a neat row, each more stunning than the next. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. If it hadn't been for the silver coin I'd received yesterday, I'd almost believe I had imagined the entire incident, as Nigel had said. But there was no imagining the three fragrant flowers in front of me.

The blood-red color looked absolutely striking against the backdrop of the snowy white window. Their natural beauty was so perfect that I almost didn't bother enhancing them, but the itch to make them shine was too strong.

One by one, I funneled my gift into the flowers' roots, livening up their leaves, deepening their colors, and adding that magical shimmer that even the starlight couldn't replicate. My blood was so warm and cozy by the time I was done I'd almost forgotten that these flowers had come from another miracle instead of my mother. It felt just like when she was here. Me admiring her work, and her admiring mine. Accept, she wasn't the one admiring it...the group of shoppers by the window were.

“Wow!” I heard one of the voices outside echo through the glass. A woman cupped her hands over her eyes and peered through the frosty window, her eyes like big brown acorns as she stared at the glittering flowers. Two other spectators joined her, a man and another woman, entranced by the display. The first woman tapped on the glass. “Are you open?”

My sleepy brain took a few dumb moments to process what was happening before I awkwardly nodded so fast that I thought I strained something. “Y-yes! Come on in!”

The group rushed inside, tracking bits of snow into the shop and nearly slipping on the floors. They went straight for the flowers, each trying to claim their favorite as more shoppers started to cluster outside.

“I’ll take this one!” The first woman thrust her coins at me.

“And I’ll have this one, please!” The man kept a protective hand on his secured flower’s stem.

“Uhh...” I couldn’t have been more unprofessional. My hair wasn’t combed, there were cinders on my skin, and my stomach was growling audibly for good measure. I literally had customers throwing money at me, but I couldn’t figure out how to take it. “Coming right up?”

“And I’ll take the last one!” the third woman said, just as another crowd of onlookers stumbled into the door. “I simply must have the flower of the season for my banquet tonight.”

“Flower of the season?” I stumbled around the shop, dazedly pushing past new customers as I went to find my clippers and newspaper to package the flowers.

“Yes, haven’t you heard?” the woman continued as she proudly eyed the new customers who had been too slow. “Lady Hollyn’s feast was a smashing success last night, and she declared her centerpiece the flower of the season. Everyone in attendance agreed, and now it’s a must-have for anyone planning a celebration.”

*Lady Hollyn? She flaunted the flower she purchased?*

It was almost too much. Two nights ago, I was preparing to waste away in the cold until I joined my mother. Now, I was being thrown coins faster than I could count them. That one little flower...may have saved my life.

Everything was a blur of flower petals, wrapping paper, and silver coins as I hastily snipped each stem and bundled up the flowers. Each buyer paid two silver coins this time, and a few lingering shoppers asked if they could prepay for the next batch of blooms. It was tempting to accept the extra coin, but I still had no clue where the flowers came from or if they would come again.

After lots of complaining about my low stock, I managed to shoo everyone out of the shop until I was finally left with a quiet room and loud thoughts. I stood in the open doorway, sucking in the frosty air as my light head eclipsed my heavy pockets. My gaze lowered to the disturbed snow, where dozens of footprints now muddled the path to and from my shop.

Drat. The footprints from this morning were gone.

I’d been so distracted by the new flowers that I forgot to investigate the fresh prints. They seemed to have come from the front door, but I hadn’t gotten a good enough look before they were trampled.

If someone was sneaking in these flowers, did they know about the attention they were getting?

An uneasy feeling rose up the back of my throat. While I was glad to have the business, something about this wasn't right. What if my shop was being used for something more serious than just a few quick sales?

I looked down at the heavy pocket in my skirt, wondering if I should even risk spending the coins I'd made. Was this all part of a strange scheme?

*Or is this still just a miracle?*

My body warmed as I remembered my wish. The soft tingle of my magic sparked in my fingertips, making the snow around me glitter like diamond dust. Was it wrong to ignore my fears? To hope this was all just a gift?

"Pardon me?" Strong and deep, a clear voice turned my attention away from the snow. "Are you still open?"

I realized how distracted I must have been by my thoughts, because he was only a few feet in front of me when I looked up. Intense amber eyes met my gaze, swallowing me in their cozy shade like a deep mug of cider. He had hair as black as coal that appeared softer than silk, though it was dusted with so much snow that he looked like a powdered biscuit on top. It startled me how tall he was, his eyes nearly a head above where mine naturally fell. I felt my breath snag in the back of my throat. I'd never met a man who was so ethereal yet also so real.

*And so familiar...*

"Is...that a no?" he asked with a small bite of his chapped lower lip.

"Oh! No!" I snapped to my senses. "I-I mean, yes! Wait...yes, we're closed, not open. I, uh, I'm all out."

*Smooth.*

"All out?"

"Yes, of flowers!"

"I see." He glanced into the window, seeming just now to notice the lack of blooms. "I'd say that's disappointing, but I believe a congratulations is in order."

"Congratulations?" I furrowed my brow.

"That your business is thriving. That's hard to accomplish this time of year." The man smiled, his teeth nearly as pure white as the snow. He was almost unspeakably handsome. The more I looked at him, the more I realized that his attractive qualities were purely natural and not material. He looked to be the same age as Emmett, give or take a year or two. His coat was thin and tattered, his trousers dirty and peppered with holes, and buried in the snow were two socked feet, his ankles bright red from the cold.

*No shoes? Maybe that's why I didn't hear him sneak up on me.*

"Will you have more flowers tomorrow?" he asked, his kind expression not even showing a glimpse of the discomfort he was clearly experiencing.

"I...uh." *Will I?* "It's hard to say, but you can always come by and see for yourself."

"Perfect, I'll be sure to stop by," he said. He pulled a crumpled cap from his pocket and stuck it on his mess of dark hair, knocking some of the snow out of his dark locks. "Good luck with your shop. I hope the season continues to be favorable to you."

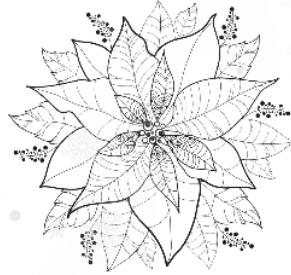
He gave me a friendly wave, then turned to leave, following the path of footprints left by the previous visitors.

“Come again!” I called back, my chest tightening as I took a moment to study his posture and replay the image of his eyes.

He was so familiar...but not because I’d spoken to him before, though I thought I’d seen him. Just once.

*He was at Mother’s funeral.*

## Chapter Six



“Five seeds?” Nigel’s eyes nearly popped out of his skinny little head when I placed the packets on the table. “You just bought three yesterday.”

“And now I need more,” I said with a proud lift of my chin. I thought back to the strange man who had visited both the funeral and my shop. I’d need more stock to draw him back in if I wanted to see him again. “You’re a business owner. Don’t you know how supply and demand works? I’m out of supplies, and now I demand more.”

“That’s not quite how I learned it,” Emmett said with a chuckle as he counted my coins. “But I get paid either way.”

“As do I,” Nigel said as he blinked at the stack of silver. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so pleased to be proven wrong, Miss Makera. It would seem whatever miracle flowers you have in your shop are a blessing for the whole village!”

I beamed brighter than a roaring fire. He was right. These flowers weren’t just helping me. They supported Nigel’s shop, filled Emmett’s paycheck, and brought joy to everyone who brought the blooms into their homes. It was a gift that kept on giving. Did it really matter where it came from when it made everyone so happy?

“Did you find out what’s making the seeds grow so fast?” Emmett asked as he handed the seeds over to Nigel to package. “Surely, you must have figured it out now that you’ve sold so many.”

“Well, I...”

“Hush, boy! Don’t pressure the young lady to share her secrets.” Nigel elbowed him as he twirled his hands over the seeds. The old newsprint underneath the packets turned to a beautiful shade of midnight blue, then grew in length and width as it magically encompassed the seeds into a perfect package. Nigel flicked his wrist, and a scrap of lingering paper stretched into what appeared to be an infinite silver ribbon. The ribbon floated through the air like a dancing streak of moonlight, then twisted around the package, finishing it with a neat bow. “If she unveils her secrets, then someone might try to steal her idea. And I don’t want miracle flower seeds being purchased from any other shops. Not when ours are clearly superior.”

He winked at me, then slid the package across the table. For someone with a *useless* gift, his sure was beautiful. Watching the shopkeeper work always made me reconsider how I saw my own magic. It may have felt useless to me, but at least others seemed to appreciate its beauty.

"I'm not asking for a secret family recipe," Emmett said tartly. "Just if she figured out the cause of these *miracles*."

"I do believe they're called miracles due to their details being miraculous," Nigel said with a snort. "I know it's all complicated, but do try to keep up, my boy." He patted Emmett on the back as he passed by him, slipping into the back room to get back to work.

"It would seem he believes me to be a dunce," Emmett huffed once we were alone.

"They do say that seeing is believing." I shrugged.

"Very funny."

"Thank you. I aim to please." I dipped into a bow, letting my loose curls shield my victorious smile.

"If that's so, then it would please me to hear what your latest discovery is with those flowers," Emmett said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"I thought you weren't asking for my secret recipe."

"Oh, so it's a recipe?"

"Since when do you grow flowers with a recipe?"

"You put flour *in* a recipe. Doesn't seem like that much of a stretch to connect the two."

"Are you certain you weren't dropped on your head as a child?" I tapped my chin.

"I was. Your head broke my fall." He grinned, and I fought the urge to throw my package at his head to do a little extra damage. "Now tell me what you learned before I fall on you again to squeeze an answer out."

"Why do you wish to know so badly?" I narrowed my eyes. Emmett wasn't the type to care about my personal business. Maybe he received bonuses from my extra purchases and wanted to ensure they were sustainable.

He didn't answer at first. The playful look in his eyes dimmed, and his smile grew muted. He looked down at the package in my hands, his teeth nibbling the edge of his lip for a moment before finally revealing his hidden thought.

"I just want to make sure it's nothing dangerous." He pressed his palms to the counter, leaning his weight into the wood as if it strained him to speak his thoughts. "You're all alone in that big shop. Anything could happen."

My heart tensed like his words had chiseled a chunk of ice off the edge of it. I wasn't sure if I liked this warmhearted Emmett. It was strange and numbing, like a frothy hot drink with too much cinnamon and a dash of brandy. His being thoughtful wasn't unwelcome, but it was confusing when I wasn't sure it was sincere.

"I'm not stealing them from orphans or spinsters if that's what you're asking," I said with a teasing bat of my lashes.

"My next guess was going to be grave robbing."

"No one is buried with flowers." I said.

“No, but they put them by the grave markers!” he said.

“Emmett.”

“Evalie?”

I let out a hot breath that came out more like a growl, earning another chuckle from Emmett. *He’s insufferable and won’t stop until he gets his answer.* “If you must know, I’m fairly certain someone has been dropping off the flowers at night.”

“At night?” Emmett’s tone shifted, the teasing light in his eyes vanishing like a smothered candle. “You mean while you’re asleep?”

“Well...”

“Someone is breaking in?” He leaned forward, his knuckles curling on the countertop. I instantly regretted telling him. How was I meant to explain that I heard footsteps at night, but it was fine because the intruder always left gifts?

“Breaking in is...a strong term.”

“Evalie.”

“Emmett?” I lifted a brow, but he didn’t crack a smile like I’d hoped.

“This is serious, Evalie.” He sounded so tense, his coarse voice rumbling more than it should have. “Did they take anything? Have you seen them?”

“No, and no. Goodness, Emmett, I’m not a fool,” I said hotly. “It’s nothing to be concerned about. I’m perfectly safe.”

“Safe from what exactly?” he asked, and my chest tightened as his question weighed on me.

*What is bringing the flowers...?*

“W-whatever it is, it’s harmless,” I said with as much assurance as I could muster.

“You don’t know what’s breaking into your house?” Emmett’s eyes widened. “Evalie—”

“Not yet!” I silenced him with a finger an inch from his lips. He went quiet, but those expressive eyes of his were burning at me with questions. “I’m going to find out tonight. It shouldn’t be hard to stay up and see who’s stopping by.”

It should be easy enough, right? I’d heard footsteps in my sleep twice now, so surely there had to be feet connected to those steps. I just needed to stay awake, not disturb my miracle-giver, and not get murdered if they were unfriendly. Piece of fruit cake!

“That sounds like a terrible idea,” Emmett said bluntly. “Intruders don’t often like to stay for tea and chats.”

“How do you know? Have you ever met an intruder?” I asked.

“You invade my thoughts. Does that count?” he said with a cheeky smile. A second later, his cheeks flushed red. “Wait, not like that! I mean—”

“I quite enjoy staying for tea, thank you very much.” I flicked my curls, trying to cover up the red creeping up my own face as my chest thudded. Why would he go and say something like that? He must have been trying to get another rise out of me. “You’re worrying over nothing.”

“And you’re not worrying enough,” Emmett said with a touch of fear lacing his coarse tone. The change startled me. Was he really that concerned? “I’m sorry, I’m not trying to be a pest...this time. I just don’t want anything to happen to you.”

My chest repeated that weird thud and cursed it for being so fussy. “Nothing will happen,” I said, trying to assure myself as much as him. “People don’t leave gifts in homes to be malicious.”

“People also don’t sneak in to leave gifts in homes.”

“I don’t know, there’s that one children’s tale about the chubby man climbing down chimneys to leave gifts.” I shrugged.

“Well, if it’s a chubby man, then I’m sure he’ll enjoy some cookies with his tea.” Emmett laughed, though it sounded forced. He let out a long sigh, seeming to understand that he couldn’t talk me out of my plan even if he wanted to. “Be careful. And do me a favor—stop by tomorrow to spend your new coins.”

“Why?” I smirked. “So you can get a bonus from all my spending?”

“No, so I can see that you’re all right.” He stepped away from the counter, his words lingering in my mind as the light mood thickened the air. “I need to go help Nigel, but if you ever need anything, you know where to find me.”

*You keep saying that...*

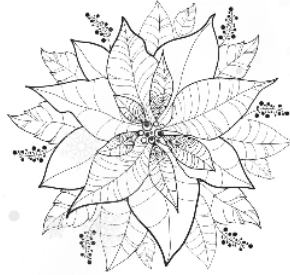
He stepped back into the storage room, and I remained rooted as I waited for the tight feeling in my chest to loosen. Could I confront whoever was invading my home? What if Emmett was right and it was a dangerous plan?

My heart rate quickened as his fearful look branded my mind. I hated that he might be right, but the only thing I hated more was being wrong.

*I’ll find out where these flowers are coming from. Miracles aren’t dangerous.*



## Chapter Seven



It wouldn't be a murderer, right? Murderers don't bring gifts.

I stretched out by the fire like I had the past two nights, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. The five seeds were planted by the window, just as the previous two nights, and I was counting the times the flames jumped higher than one of the cracks in the hearth to stay awake. Despite the flames, a coarse chill shuddered through my bones, rattling me like the rafters in my attic.

*There's nothing to be afraid of. It's just like any other night.*

Emmett's face wandered into my thoughts as I counted another jumping flame. Maybe I should have asked him for help; he had offered enough times. Of course, he couldn't wait inside with me. There was no way I would ever spend a night under the same roof as him. Though I wondered if he'd agree to wait out in the snow...

I glanced toward the window. The dark sky made the glass look like a portal to a bottomless abyss, with a touch of white snow framing its entrance. On closer inspection, I noticed a few fat flurries smacking against the glass. I frowned at the harsh weather, realizing that I likely wouldn't have been able to convince Emmett to brave it no matter how nicely I asked.

My attention turned to the flames, but my little game wasn't enough to keep my eyelids from growing heavy. A long yawn crept up on me. It was probably only ten o'clock, but the sky got so dark in the winter that it already felt like night had dragged on for an eternity.

I flared my magic to life, concentrating on the flow of my gift in an attempt to keep my mind awake. The warm sensation it brought me only made me sleepier, so I looked around for something I could cast the gift on.

Sitting on top of the hearth was a pile of pine branches that had either been too wet for me to use or had too many pine needles for the fire. The bush of greenery looked so dim and shadowy with the low light from the fire, so I directed my magic toward the cluster of emerald-green needles.

One by one, I tossed little colors of light into the greenery, speckling the pine branches with magical twinkles. A soft smile spanned my lips as I added more and more spots of light above the mantle until the entire area was glittering with colored

lights. My magic still buzzed through me as I watched the lights gleam like a constellation made of confetti.

The lights were equal parts distracting and soothing. The cozy sensation of my magic eased my muscles that still ached from wandering around in the cold, and the twinkling colors mesmerized me like a moth to the flame.

I decided to rest my eyes for just a moment, but as they started to flutter shut, the smallest glimpse of a shadow caught the corner of my eye.

*What?*

My breath froze in my chest, solid enough that I feared I'd need to chisel it out later. Now that I was wide awake, I could hear the soft thump of footsteps. They must have snuck inside while I was distracted. My heart drummed, and my entire body stiffened as I watched the shadow grow taller on the wall.

*Don't panic. You knew someone might come.*

The steps moved slowly from the door to the table and then toward the window to my left. I squeezed my eyes closed, trying to be as still as a corpse as I forced myself to take quiet, slow breaths. The intruder's steps paused for a moment, and I felt my gut twist as I imagined them looking down on my sleeping form. They wouldn't harm me, would they?

I tried to breathe steadily as if I was sleeping, but it felt like I was sucking air through a pinhole. The intruder moved again, shifting closer toward the window where the pots were. My blood electrified. This was it. They had to be looking away from me now.

I peeked through my lashes, keeping my eyes as closed as possible as I took in the figure standing before the snowy window. Seeing the intruder somehow made them even more scary. It was definitely a man. He was tall, with dark hair speckled with white snowflakes. The light from the fire didn't give me a good look at him, but there were a few things I immediately noticed.

*He has no shoes...*

His worn socks were soaked from trudging through the snow. He was empty-handed, and his hands were stuffed into the pockets of a tattered coat that looked all too familiar.

*All of him looked familiar.*

He stepped closer to the window, and the light from inside turned the black glass into a crystal—clear mirror that revealed the face I had seen earlier that day.

"You!" I jumped off the rug, my socked feet skidding on the floor as my held breath burst free.

If the intruder had been wearing any socks, they would have been knocked off by the extent of his fright. He let out a sharp gasp, then stumbled back against the window with a smack on his spine. I stormed forward, cornering him against the cool panes of glass but still keeping a safe enough distance that he couldn't attack me if he had any weapons on him.

"You're the shopper from earlier today!" I shouted.

"Uh, yes, I uh..." He bolted.

My muscles responded faster than my thoughts as I dashed to block his exit. He wasn't very fast, likely due to being cold and stiff. I ran in front of the big green door, throwing my arms out as if I was prepared to catch a full-grown man like he was some runaway cat.

Nevertheless, my efforts to block the door were enough to bring the intruder to an abrupt halt. He nearly tumbled into me, stopping himself just a few inches from my nose before stumbling back a step. Our eyes locked for a petrifying moment, and I saw the depths of his panic rushing through that amber gaze.

*He's more afraid than I am. Good.*

"Identify yourself!" I demanded more loudly than I intended to. It was hard to monitor my volume when my heart was pounding in my ear canals. "Now!"

"I... I'm—"

"What are you doing here!?"

"Well, I—"

"Did you think I wouldn't notice you?"

"No, I—"

"You think I'm a fool!?"

"No—"

"For the love of snowflakes! Answer me!"

"Alfie!" he shouted, his hands springing up in the air in surrender. I snapped my mouth shut, the room quiet except for our heavy breathing. No weapons were tucked in his belt, and his pockets had too many holes on the outside to be carrying anything; he didn't even have a flower. "My name is Alfie. I mean you no harm, Miss Evalie."

"How do you know my name?" I asked, my hands lowering cautiously to my sides but my eyes never leaving him for a second. "I don't recall making introductions today."

"You're right, please forgive me."

"Forgive you for what? Breaking into my home or knowing my name before I knew yours? Because both are equally unsettling at the moment." I flicked my eyes toward the fire, taking mental note of where the iron poker was in case I needed a weapon. Unarmed didn't mean not dangerous.

"For everything," Alfie said with a sigh that seemed to deflate his entire torso. "I should have explained myself long before now. The only reason I've been sneaking around is because I was certain you wouldn't want my help."

"I wouldn't want your help, so you broke into my home while I was sleeping?" I repeated with a long blink.

"Yes..." He bit the edge of his cracked lip. "I suppose it does sound rather foolish when put that way."

"I don't know if *foolish* is the term I was looking for." I folded my arms, trying to settle my fluttering fear while keeping my attention sharp. "I was thinking *illegal*. Give me one reason I shouldn't step outside and scream for help."

Alfie's eyes drifted toward the door sheepishly, then he shrugged. "I suppose because I didn't technically do anything illegal."

"You broke into my house!"

"Actually, the door was unlocked, and this is a shop, isn't it? I didn't break into anything."

*Oh.*

I bit the inside of my cheek, my blood pulsing up my neck. “Well... Y—you still shouldn’t be here! Like I said, I don’t even know you!”

“My name is Alfie Northmill—”

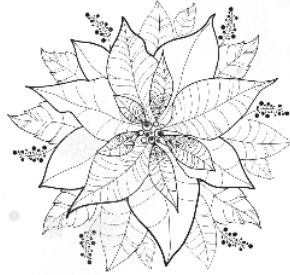
“I don’t care about your name! I mean, I did want to know, but that’s not the point!” I threw my fists to my sides, my frustration far past its boiling point. I shouldn’t be arguing with an intruder about why he couldn’t enter my home. “Tell me what you think you’re doing here, and how do you know me?”

He took a deep breath, probably more for my sake than his. His demeanor relaxed, and his carved jaw softened as he stuck his hands into his holey pockets and rocked back on his frostbitten heels. It surprised me how calm he could be after being caught red-handed, but his easiness allowed me to catch my choppy breath.

I didn’t understand why it was easy to relax around him. He shouldn’t even be here.

“I’ve never officially met you, Evalie, but I’ve known about you for years,” he explained, his voice soft and smooth now that his vocal cords had warmed up. “Your mother used to tell me all about you when she would visit.”

## Chapter Eight



“My mother?” The words were there, but my voice didn’t feel like my own. The air became too thick to swallow, and my throat was too tight. It had been weeks since anyone had openly spoken of Mother, but the grief was as raw as the day I lost her. “You knew her?”

Alfie nodded, his eyes dimming to the point of looking more grey than amber. The same grief that had haunted me filled his gaze, softening my heart little by little toward the intruder.

“I did, ever since I was a little boy,” he said in a low voice. “I was orphaned at a young age and have spent most of my life living on the streets. Many folks pity homeless children, but your mother always ensured I had a warm meal on trips into the next town.”

*Her trips into town? Does he mean when she would take the flower cart into the marketplace in Wreathera?*

“She spoke with me on many occasions and even invited me to follow her to Wreathera when the weather was nice.” A small smile twitched on his lips, hiding the pain in his voice. “She spoke fondly of you and how well she thought we would get along. She often offered to take me home and look after me, but I always refused, knowing that I would only burden your happy family.”

“She offered to bring you here?” I shifted forward, my mind turning as I imagined my mother half-raising the man before me. It definitely sounded like something she would do, except... “She never mentioned you.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” he said with a soft laugh. “I never told her my name. I practically made a game out of letting her guess it. Eventually, she gave up and just called me *boy*.”

*“There was a cute little boy at the market today! Maybe you can come with me next time and meet him.”*

*“I would have sold more flowers, but some boys kept chasing bumblebees in my direction.”*

I sucked in a breath as I recalled the small mentions Mother had made of children at the market. She’d often spoken of mischievous or fun little boys, but had she truly been talking about Alfie?

“Is that why you were at the funeral?” I asked.

It seemed like a silly question since everyone in town had been in attendance whether they knew Mother or not. But everyone had come to flaunt their gifts, and this Alfie fellow didn’t even approach me.

“It is. I wanted to pay my respects, but...” He held his hand up to his eyes, studying his palm before curling his fingers around his tattered glove. “I wasn’t ready to share my gift then. It just didn’t feel like the right time, considering everything.”

“What’s *everything*?” I eyed his hand, noticing the same flex in his palm that all gift-wielders did when activating their magic. “Stop beating around the evergreen and tell me what you were doing then and now.”

He nodded, his warm eyes flickering in the light of the fire. Everything about him felt soft and warm, but the tone of his voice carried a chill that was frozen and cracked. It was like watching a candle burn under a layer of impermeable ice.

“I came to share the gift I should have shared after your mother’s passing,” he said simply as he glanced back at the empty pots. “You see, I share a near identical gift to your mother, and after losing her, I wasn’t sure you were ready to see that kind of magic again. Also, I wasn’t ready to see it myself.”

*The same gift...? Is that even possible?*

“You...you grow flowers?” It would have made complete sense, but it felt too simple to believe that my mother’s uniqueness could be so easily replaced.

“Yes, but not instantaneously like hers,” he admitted. “Mine takes a few hours to work, plus I require seeds. The flowers usually spring up overnight. When I first met your mother, I was giftless. It wasn’t until watching her that I learned of my own power. I sometimes wonder if part of her gift was planting seeds of magic in others and helping it grow.” He smiled down at his palm, his eyes twinkling.

It had been from a gift all along. A gift my mother grew.

“That explains part of it,” I said, keeping caution in my voice. “But why sneak in during the dead of night?”

“I...” He scratched the back of his head. “I don’t really have a good excuse. I think I was just worried that you wouldn’t accept my gift. Since your mother passed, I’ve been worried about you and how you were going to get by. Once it became clear that you were struggling, I wanted to help, but I didn’t want it to seem like a handout.”

“So you broke in and used magic in my shop without my consent?” I scowled.

“I didn’t break in,” he reminded me. “But you’re right, I should have asked. I’m sorry. Truth be told, I’m often unwanted by common society, so this seemed like the only option in my mind. Clearly, I was mistaken. I promise to leave you alone from now on.”

He looked longingly toward the door I was blocking, waiting for me to let him leave. I didn’t move, my heart fighting with my mind as I pondered his story. Part of me wanted to believe every word. The thought of having even a fraction of Mother’s gift left behind in this world made my heart glow, but it all felt too good to be true. How had he gone unnoticed by me for so long? If he’d been watching me like he claimed, wouldn’t I have spotted him before now?

*But I did spot him at the funeral... He isn’t lying about that.*

I nibbled the inside of my cheek, glancing between the empty flower pots and the homeless man who had saved me from an early grave. For so many nights, I had wished for a miracle. Was I really about to let one walk out the door now?

“How long did you plan to share your gift with me?” I asked.

“Oh, um... I didn’t really have a timeline in mind.” He looked taken aback that I was even still speaking with him after all he had done. “As long as I was useful, I suppose. All I wanted was to see you taken care of, Evalie. Just as your mother did for me.”

*Could that be all he wants?*

“What about all the money I’ve made?” I arched a brow. “Don’t you want a cut?”

“No, that money is for you.”

“But it’s from your gift.”

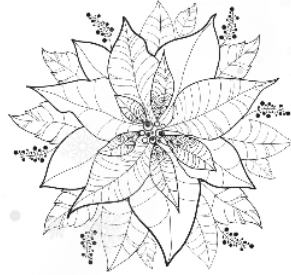
“Precisely, it’s a *gift*.” He sounded so serious, his deep voice melting over me like warm wax dripping down a candlestick. “I’m content with my life, Evalie. I wish to help you feel secure in yours.”

My walls cracked. His honest gaze and shoeless feet displayed more sincerity than any magical gift could ever convey. I’d already lost so much. Maybe it was about time I accepted a morsel of help.

*Why deny a miracle when it goes so far as to meet you in your home?*

“Alfie, will you be back tomorrow?”

## Chapter Nine



Alfie's footsteps entered my dreams when I finally went to sleep that night. The creak of the door rattled through my head, and his frozen feet clunked like they were blocks of ice as he stepped on the floorboards. When I woke up, I half-expected to see him standing by the window again, but there were only five gorgeous fresh flowers.

I pulled myself off the floor a little too quickly for my stiff spine, earning a sharp twinge in my neck. The flowers were just as real as Alfie had been, but it all felt like such a dream. A handsome, kind stranger breaking into my house to magically grow flowers with my mother's gift felt too good to be true...yet I was looking at the evidence.

*It's all real, right?*

I peeked outside the frosty glass, the warm sunrise just now cresting over the snowy trees. A smile spread across my lips as I spotted the fresh tracks in the snow stretching from my front door down the market's street. There was no assuming it was a dream now. Those snowy footprints didn't come from a magic elf.

I'd woken up earlier than usual, so no customers were banging on my window yet. I took the opportunity to cast my gift over the flowers, enhancing their beauty and brightening the room. They looked too precious to be real, like they'd been pulled from my greatest dreams and buried in the soil. It baffled me that a man with such a beautiful gift would live so poorly. Something wasn't right about that...Was he truly all right with me keeping all the money I made?

*He can't even afford shoes...*

A knock rattled the front door, and I heard a clump of snow fall from the roof, splattering onto the front stoop.

"Ah! Not in my boots!"

"Emmett?" I recognized his voice immediately, then rushed to throw open the heavy door. Sure enough, the clump of snow I'd heard fall was now covering Emmett's head, sliding down the back of his shirt and dripping into his boots.

"H-hello, Evalie," he said between hisses as he fought to shake the snow out of his shirt. "Just thought I'd stop by and clear off your roof, apparently."



He stamped his boots, his face reddening as the frigid snow presumably seeped into his socks. I held back a laugh, but then I remembered that this was Emmett and not an actual customer, so I cackled like a child in a snow fort.

"How thoughtful of you. My shutters could use a dusting, too, if you're not already cold enough." I laughed.

"Ah, well, I wasn't planning on being *that* generous today," he said as he brushed another pile of snow off his shoulder. "I only meant to stop by and see that you were still breathing, but since you appear to be letting out plenty of hot air, I guess I'll be on my way."

He'd stopped by to check on me? Of course, he probably didn't think I could handle things myself.

"Leaving so soon? I thought you'd at least want to browse my new inventory." I pulled the door open another few inches, stepping aside so Emmett could glimpse the fresh blooms. He reluctantly peered around me, then nearly stumbled back into another pile of snow once he saw the row of dazzling flowers.

"That's quite the inventory," he said, gaping. "Did you find out what's causing them to grow? Since you're alive and all, I'm assuming they didn't come from a dagger-wielding flower lover."

I thought back to Alfie and his ragged clothes and exquisite magic. He was not a dagger-wielding lunatic, but he wasn't necessarily the type of person most folk would let wander into their homes either.

"If you must know, they're a gift," I said with a plain smile.

"A gift?" he narrowed his eyes on the blooms, his bright-green gaze reflecting glimpses of the blood-red blooms. "From who?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"I beg to disagree."

"It matters if they're dangerous."

"Do dangerous people give gifts?"

"Yes, haven't you ever been told not to accept treats from strangers?" he said firmly. "People don't just hand out valuable flowers from the goodness of their hearts."

"You don't know that," I said, sounding much snappier than I intended. I couldn't help it; he knew nothing about Alfie's story. "He could very well have a heart of gold."

"He?" Emmett locked onto the word, and my breath hooked in the back of my throat. "It's a man, then? Do you know him?"

"I don't see why it's any of your concern." I stepped out of the doorway and deeper into my warm home, leaving him on the doorstep and half-hoping he would just walk away.

He didn't. Instead, he followed me inside, shutting the door behind us to keep out the frosty wind.

"I'm just worried about you, Evalie," he said as he suspiciously eyed the enchanted blooms. "Did this man break in again? Did you speak with him?"

"Goodness, Emmett, he can't break in if the door isn't locked." I gestured toward the door as I borrowed Alfie's logic. "There's nothing for you to worry

about. He's completely harmless."

"He's a friend of yours then? You've met him before?" Emmett's questions twisted my nerves. I locked my jaw, biting back the urge to snap at him for being so nosey. He had never cared about my companions before, and I didn't need him to care about them now.

"No, but he knew my mother," I said firmly, watching as the shock flashed across his cold skin.

"He knew Evangeline?" He spoke my mother's name so gently that I realized I'd nearly forgotten the sound of it. A lump rose in my throat, but I swallowed it before it could force any emotions to show on my face. Even without responding, he seemed to understand that I was being sincere. The tension in his shoulders sank, and he nodded softly. "I see. That's why you trust him."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked, gritting my teeth. "That I'm gullible or something?"

"No, not at all," he said hastily. "I would never say that, Evalie. I only meant that it explains why you're so comfortable with the whole situation. Your mother was a good person, so it only makes sense that she befriended good people."

She was. She was the best person. Alfie knew that, which was why he cared so much about us both.

"She liked you, too," I said as I recalled all the times Mother had encouraged me to play with Emmett as children.

"I guess I can't argue her judgment of character, then." He smiled.

"Hmm, I wouldn't be so quick to assume. You're still rather questionable."

"Does that mean your flower friend is questionable as well?"

"No, just you." I smirked, earning a roll from those emerald-green eyes. "Alfie was far less irritating, too."

"Alfie?" Emmett repeated the name, and I cursed under my breath for letting it slip. "Interesting name. I don't think I've heard of any Alfies around town before."

"Because he's not from our town," I explained. "Mother met him when she traveled to Wreathera with her flower cart."

"Isn't that convenient?" Emmett's tone grew less playful, his body language stiffening as he looked back at the flowers. A few shoppers had started glancing through the window, their eyes drawn to the sparkling display. "How long did he say he knew your mother?"

"Emmett..." I glared. "Is it so hard to trust me?"

*I may have lost my mother, but that doesn't make me a child.*

"It's not hard to trust you," he said in a gentler tone than I anticipated. "It's this old friend of your mother's that I'm questioning."

"See? I told you that you're questionable."

He gave me a look that was somewhere between amused and annoyed. As much as it irritated me that Emmett kept poking into my business, I secretly appreciated that he cared...but it was very secret. If Alfie had been murderous, it was good to know that Emmett wouldn't have let my corpse grow *too* cold.

"I should probably get back to work." He gently changed the subject as he noticed the crowd clustering by the closed door. Fortunately, no one was bursting

inside this time. “I’m supposed to be on a delivery right now. Lord Benedict requested medicinal herbs, so I was only stopping by on my way.”

“Lord Benedict? But his home is on the other side of town.”

“Which is why I should hurry along.” Emmett’s cheeks flushed, and he cleared his throat. “Listen... If you trust this Alfie fellow, then I trust you. But if you die, I’m writing ‘I told you so’ on your grave.”

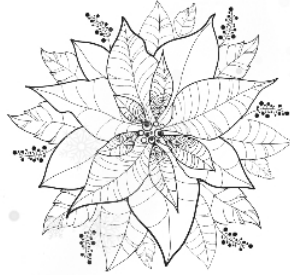
He wandered back toward the door, placing his hand on the knob but hesitating to let in the swarm of shoppers waiting outside.

“I’ll drop by some more seeds on my next delivery. How many would you like this time?”

He may have just been trying to make an extra sale, impress his boss, or remove any excuse for me to bug him at the shop again later. But in truth, all I heard was that he actually did trust me to handle my new flower friend.

“Ten, please,” I said with a small smile. “Thank you.”

## Chapter Ten



I lined up the freshly potted seeds in the window as I watched the sun disappear behind the trees. It was snowing again, the gentle downfall looking like a dusting of powdered sugar fluttering from above.

Nigel had raised the prices of his seeds after seeing how well they were doing in my shop. I couldn't blame him for taking advantage of the opportunity since I was doing the very same thing, but the raised cost had made this batch of seeds a rather risky investment.

*He'll be back. He said he'd be back.*

I twirled a loose strand of my hair so tightly around my finger that it started to swell. I'd spent too many of my coins on the seeds for tomorrow. If Alfie didn't come, I'd be just as broke as when this all began, but if he did come, I'd be set until spring.

The gamble made my stomach knot. I'd finally climbed out of the darkness only to douse my ladder in oil and dangle a flame in front of it. He had to come. He just had to.

I turned my attention to the fire to distract myself. It was still early, after all. He usually arrived after sundown, and it was only now growing dark. I couldn't let myself panic when there wasn't any reason to worry yet.

*Though that's easier said than done.*

I grabbed the tea kettle and began brewing some of the cheap tea leaves I'd picked up yesterday. It had been a bit of a splurge to buy something with no nutritional value, but on such cold nights, it was encouraging to have something warm to put inside me. I rationed a small pinch of the leaves and brewed a weak cup over the fire. The drink was barely tinted brown, but I didn't want to use too many leaves in case I couldn't afford more.

My gift flared to life, and I directed the magic into my stained teacup. My gift transformed the ceramic mug into painted porcelain, decorated with the same red flowers I grew each day. I frowned at the image my gift had manifested. The point of brewing tea was to take my mind *off* the flowers, not put more in front of my nose.

The magic had darkened the shade of the tea to a rich amber and even enhanced the smell, so it was at least partially useful. I took a long sip of the hot drink, and although my gift couldn't change the weak taste, the added smell greatly improved the experience.

I lowered my cup with a contented sigh, my body finally relaxing from the mixture of my cozy magic and the warm drink.

"You sound happy."

I nearly splashed hot water all over myself, my heart leaping into my throat as I jolted around to see Alfie standing inside the door. A trail of snow followed his socked toes, and his teeth were still chattering a touch as he rubbed his red palms together.

"Goodness, I need to get you a bell!" I clutched a hand over my heart, hastily setting my cup to meet him at the door. "You're as quiet as a mouse!"

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't sure if you were sleeping or not." He pulled off his cap and ran a hand through his dark locks, brushing some snow out of it and slicking back his hair in a manner that drew my eye. "I didn't want to knock and wake you."

"So you decided to creep inside my home while I was unconscious?" I raised a brow.

"I mean...yes." A cheeky smile twitched at the edge of his lips. "But I had permission this time. Didn't you ask me to come back?"

"No, I asked if you *were* coming back. No invitation was given."

"Oh? I suppose I can leave then..."

"N-no—" I thrust out my hand as if to stop him, freezing mid-movement with an awkward lip bite. His smile grew, and my cheeks warmed hotter than my abandoned teacup. "I mean, you came all this way, and it's freezing out. It would be rude of me to throw you out into the snow."

"Ah, how gracious of you." He cocked his head, using those amber eyes to play me like a fiddle.

"I'm really a saint," I said with a flick of my hair. "Not to mention I'm the humblest person I know."

"And you never exaggerate, either."

"Of course not. I'm not like other girls who exaggerate a million times a day," I said with a lift of my chin. "I'm a gem, truly."

"Truly." Alfie laughed, his warm voice making my empty shop feel a bit fuller. "Since I'm here already, I suppose I could repay your kindness with just a touch of my magic—if it's not too charitable, of course. I'd hate to outshine your goodwill." He winked, and despite knowing he was teasing, my heart rate quickened at the offer. I wasn't going to be broke, after all.

*Thank goodness for miracles.*

"I'll allow it," I said in a smooth voice. "Just don't let it go to your head."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Alfie chuckled under his breath, then stepped further into the room to approach the row of flower pots. He came within inches of brushing past me, my arm tingling at the anticipated contact that never came. His scent caught my attention. It was sweeter than I expected, like sugary pine needles laced with cinnamon.

I watched with full focus as he raised his palm over each pot, letting his hand linger for a few seconds before moving on to the next. His gift was just like Mother's. It had no visual indication that it was being used, but the results were undeniable. The only unique part was that his took longer to enact and required seeds, but I supposed even an offshoot of magic was bound to take on its own properties.

"There, that should do the trick," he said with a long sigh. "I hope my gift can serve you well once more. I won't impose any further. You've already been far more welcoming than I deserve after how I invaded your privacy." He started heading back toward the door, and the excitement in my chest fizzled out like a dwindling flame.

*That's it?*

He brushed past me again, still leaving just enough inches between us that the hair on my arm prickled. Something inside me wasn't ready for him to leave yet. My throat felt dry and my palms damp as I watched him reach for the ivy-green door. He'd done so much for me, brought me more wealth than I could ever imagine, and never asked for anything in return. I couldn't let my miracle just walk away like that.

"W-wait!" I held up my palm, my throat clamping around my voice as I realized I had no plans for what to say next.

Alfie turned around, his handsome features taking on an almost ethereal glow in the mixture of fire and moonlight. "Yes, Evalie?" He said my name slower than usual, like he had hoped I would draw out this moment and wanted to do the same.

My heart fluttered, rooting a seed inside me that was digging too deep not to want to blossom.

"W-where are you going to go?" I asked the first that popped into my mind, hoping it wasn't as awkward as it sounded in my head.

"Back home, I suppose," he said as he ran his hand up his firm arm.

"Oh, where's home for you? Are you still living outside of town?"

"Um, I guess so. Though *home* might be a misleading word..." He looked down at his shoeless feet, curling his toes as a slight red rose up his neck. His reluctance to answer snapped into place a split second later, and a heavy guilt sank into me.

*Nice going, Evalie. He's homeless. He's probably occupying an alleyway right now.*

"Well, if you're not in any rush, you can stay here and warm up for a little while," I offered, pointing toward the fire and kettle I had left out. "It's the least I can do after all you've done for me."

"That's very kind of you," he said with a reminiscent look. "Just like your mother. It's not surprising that you carry her goodness in you."

A tightness pulled at the corners of my eyes, threatening to blur my vision, but I blinked it away. It was a strange combination of feelings hearing this stranger talk about Mother. In some ways, it healed a piece of me that I hadn't let scar, and in other ways, it dug the wound deeper. How had she never told me more about Alfie? I wondered what it would have been like if we had been acquainted over more than just sorrows.

"I'm not sure I could ever compare to her," I said as I pulled a chair from the table and sat, resting my chin on my palm. "She was just like her magic. She was beautiful, full of life, and always putting smiles on everyone's faces. And like *my* magic, I'm a fraud. Sometimes my illusions even go completely unnoticed by others. What use is a gift when only you can see it? My beauty is only surface deep, and no one cares about me for long. This shop used to buzz with regulars daily, but after the funeral, all the friendly faces disappeared."

"I'm here," Alfie said in a low voice that washed through me like a sip of warm cider. His sincere amber gaze dove into mine like a remedy, searching for the bits of me that hadn't healed. "I may not have met you until now, but I see that as all the more reason to stay. You say your gift is shallow, but the joy it brings others flows deeper than any magic. What you give is worth so much more than what anyone receives."

"My mother used to say that," I said with a reflexive smile that crinkled my nose.

"Where do you think I learned it from?" he said as he sank into the chair next to mine. He sat so close, the scent of pine on him drifting toward me and tickling my nose. "You were very blessed to have a family like her."

I looked down at my hands, twirling my fingers together as I watched tiny sparks of my magic dance on my fingertips. My gift had always felt useless to me, like it was made to be an accessory to someone else's and never achieve anything on its own. But when Alfie described it, it felt like it could be so much more...

"What about you?" I looked up from my hands. "Do you have any family?"

His expression dimmed, and though his smile remained, it carried only a fraction of the joy. I immediately regretted asking, but it was too late to retract the question.

"No, it was only my parents and me." He let out a long breath that punctured my heart. "They were coal miners, and they perished in a cave-in about ten years ago."

*Ten years ago...*

"That's how I lost my father, too," I said with a slight stutter in my breath. "Ten years ago, he perished in a cave-in..."

We shared the same look of grim realization. My heart bonded to his in that moment, our shared grief filling the holes in each other's fractured hearts. The same accident that had left me fatherless and my mother a widow had taken everything away from Alfie.

"I'm so sorry, Evalie," Alfie breathed. "What...what about your mother? I never heard what happened to her."

My tongue went limp, and my eyes watered as I recalled the last moment I saw her smile. "She got sick," I said in a voice barely above a whisper. "It was red fever."

Alfie sucked in a breath. "Red fever? Isn't that highly contagious?"

"Yes, but I never caught it from her," I explained, watching his body visibly relax. "I had it bad as a little girl and nearly didn't make it, but I pulled through, and now I'm immune. When Mother caught it, I thought for sure that she would be the same way. She was so much stronger than me in every way, a little fever shouldn't have been enough to take her down. But when she went to the doctor in Wreathera

for help... she never came home. I was lucky. I should never have believed she would be, too.”

A tear dripped down my cheek, but I wiped it away before it could slip down to my chin. Alfie shifted forward, his hand barely outstretched as if he wanted to console me. I didn’t move. We were still practically strangers, so it would be odd to look to him for comfort, but when he pulled his hand back, I found myself wishing he had reached out.

“I’m sorry. I know how painful it is to lose your family,” he said in a hoarse voice.

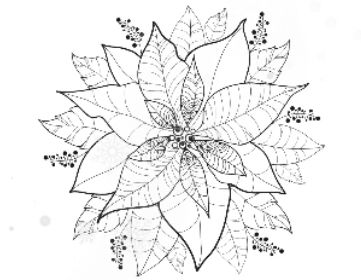
It was terrible how many people *did* understand how I felt. First Emmett, now Alfie... “I said I was lucky, but that couldn’t be further from the truth, huh?” I met his gaze. “The ‘lucky’ ones are left alone in this world, always wishing for those they lost. That seems more like an unlucky fate to me.”

He shifted his hand closer, resting it on the table a few inches away from me, like he was itching to offer me comfort but didn’t want to cross that line.

“The fact that you’re still here, Evalie, makes all of us the lucky ones. Your gift is just as beautiful as your mother’s, and I’m so fortunate to have gotten to see it for myself.” He said it so sweetly, like the taste of a ginger cookie that was sugary despite its strong bite. He looked down at my hands, noticing how I had been playing with my magic and dancing little sparks of light around my fingers. Alfie smiled, his eyes reflecting the tiny colors of light. “The world just feels more alive to me, knowing that you’re in it.”



## Chapter Eleven



It was just before midnight when Alfie left, and I passed out in front of the fire. I had enough firewood to heat my bedroom upstairs at this point, but something about sleeping in front of the hearth just felt natural. A smile brightened my face when I opened my eyes and smelled the fresh scent of flowers. I climbed to my feet, the smell of smoke clinging to my hair and dress as I admired their beauty.

Even though I knew where they came from, it was still so magical. I looked out the window, hunting for Alfie's footprints in the snow to remind myself that our time together had been real. His long strides painted the pure white canvas with shadowy blotches that looked like works of art to me. My miracle was real, as was the comfort he had brought me.

I raised my hand to cast my gift on the blooms, remembering how Alfie had watched my gift spark through my fingers. It baffled me that he saw anything remarkable about my gift while his was so much more wondrous. Emmett had seemed impressed with my gift before, but all magic was special to him, considering he had none. Alfie could do so much with his gift, yet he chose to share it with me and call me beautiful.

*Wait, not me. My gift. He called my gift beautiful. I can't get ahead of myself...*

I finished enhancing each flower with my magic, filling the entire front window with bursting blooms. The first customer trotted up the path, a hefty coin purse bouncing around in his palm as he eyed the dazzling display. I straightened my dress, tied up my red locks in a loose bun, and put on the first smile that didn't feel completely forced since Mother got sick.

"Time to get to work."

.....

Sales continued for the next week. I planted ten seeds each night, and Alfie's magic produced ten flowers by the morning. My pockets had never felt so full while my stomach was so empty, but I didn't have to survive on only bread and potatoes anymore. I had money—more than I could ever have imagined.

I practically skipped all the way to the general store, kicking up puffs of snow and giggling like a schoolgirl. I burst through the door, nearly colliding with Mrs.

Evernough, who was shopping for parsnips.

I apologized, then scanned the shop for someone I could share my successes with. The excitement inside me was too great to keep to myself, so when I spotted Emmett behind the counter, I nearly barreled over a display of cranberries to get to him.

“Emmett! Look!” I dug the coin pouches—yes, *pouches*—out of my pocket and plopped them on the counter with a proud *clunk*. “I did it! I sold another ten flowers. If I had more pots, I could probably even sell more! The seeds grew perfectly, and now I have enough to make it until spring. Isn’t it perfectly wonderful?”

Emmett ogled my coins for a moment, then shifted his glowing smile to me. I had expected him to gawk more at the silver, but for whatever reason, my cheerful expression seemed to catch his eye even more than the coins.

“That’s incredible, Evalie,” he said, so happily that I almost wondered if he forgot who he was talking to. “And I only doubted you twice!”

Nope. He remembered.

“Which makes this all the sweeter,” I said with a smug grin. “Never thought I’d be a rich girl, did you?”

“Wait. You’re a girl? Ohh...that explains the annoying voice.”

“It’s just my impression of you.”

“Cute.”

“And rich.” I winked, flipping a coin in my palm.

“Don’t forget humble.” He laughed, but his teasing ended up flashing my thoughts back to when Alfie and I had shared the same joke. “I’m glad to have a friend who will put me in my place.”

“Who said we were friends?” I asked with a smug tilt of my head.

“Well, since you’re rich now, I fully intend to suck up to you.” He nodded toward the coins. “But not too much. That just wouldn’t suit our relationship. I think I’ll back down to maybe two insults a day.”

“Only two? Goodness, you *are* trying to win me over.” I rolled my eyes with a suppressed smile. Never in my life had I expected to live comfortably on my own after seeing how Emmett was forced to live. I knew he had a roof over his head and food on the table, but he was always working to accomplish that. Being able to stand here and laugh with him was a luxury I thought I’d never have.

*He deserves days like this, too.*

“Would you look at that?” Nigel whistled and stepped over to admire my pile of treasure. “All right, I admit it. I shouldn’t have doubted you. You have my deepest apologies.”

“Apology accepted,” I said with a proud grin.

“What about me?” Emmett asked.

“You never apologized,” I said.

“Yes, but I didn’t doubt you nearly as much, so I should only have to do half the groveling,” he argued.

“You’ll grovel as much as the lady likes,” Nigel said with a humorous glare. “So long as she buys my seeds, you had better treat her like your paycheck depends on it.”

"I like the sound of that." I tapped my chin thoughtfully.

"Oh, would you look at that...I think Mrs. Evernough needs help carrying that parsnip." Emmett started to sneak away, but I wouldn't let him escape so easily. I wasn't done flaunting my new wealth.

"Hold on." I grabbed him by the wrist without thinking, my skin sparking at our touch and causing my fingertips to grow hot. I pushed the feeling down, assuming it was leftover adrenaline from my success. "Don't go. I haven't spent any money yet."

"That's what I like to hear!" Nigel laughed. "What would you like, dear? I'll have Emmett here carry home anything you'd like."

"Don't say that! She might ask to buy a pine tree!" Emmett glanced nervously toward the snowy wonderland outside.

"If that's what she wants, then I'll grab you an axe," Nigel said with an eager nod. "What do you say, Evalie? Want a tree?"

"It's tempting..." I gave Emmett a mischievous smile, my fingers still latched around his warm wrist. I was surprised he hadn't pulled away yet. "But I think I'll just take another ten-pack of my usual seeds, some bread, a jar of jam...and one more thing."

I dug out the one gold coin I had earned from a buyer who'd insisted on leaving a tip. The polished metal gleamed like a mini sun, drawing the eager eyes of the shopkeeper. I tugged on Emmett's wrist, nearly pulling him across the counter as I offered his hand to Nigel alongside the coin.

"I'd like to buy out your employee for the day. This should cover his salary and a bit more so he can still receive full pay." I watched as both men's jaws fell open like broken nutcrackers.

"B-buy me?" Emmett looked between the coin and his hand, still not pulling free. "I didn't realize I was for sale."

"You are today!" Nigel said as he eagerly scooped up the gold coin from my palm. "He's all yours! Just bring him back in one piece, I'll need him for deliveries tomorrow. It looks like a winter flu is spreading, and no one wants to leave their houses."

"Yes, sir." I smiled, turning my attention back to the stunned man I'd just acquired. The look of shock he wore was worth the gold coin all on its own.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he studied me like I was the recipe for his obscure fruit cake. "You worked hard for that coin. You shouldn't spend it on me."

*What you give is worth so much more than what anyone receives.*

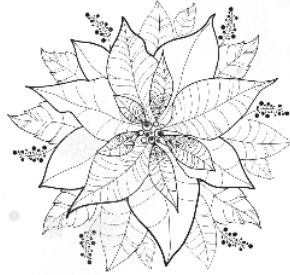
"Consider this a thank you for everything you've done for me," I said as a shy warmth crept up my neck. I released Emmett's wrist, realizing I'd probably been keeping him trapped. "Sucking up to me worked. Now get over here and accept the consequences of your actions."

He gave me one of those smiles that didn't simply flash by in a moment. It was memorable in the way I associated peppermint with the colors red and white or cinnamon with the feeling of warmth. His smile reminded me of all the good feelings that I had forgotten when I lost my mother. They were feelings I had associated with him for longer than I realized, but I didn't remember until I was ready to feel them again.

“Very well then.” He took off his apron and tossed it on the counter, his green eyes fusing to mine as he sat up on the counter, swung his legs over to the other side, and jumped down. “What would you like me to do?”

“Celebrate with me.”

## Chapter Twelve



I couldn't remember the last time I had run around the town square and admired the decorations. Mother and I tended to keep inside where we could tend to the shop and make shortbread cookies or pop white corn. Emmett kept pace with me, appropriately oohing and awing when I told him to look at something spectacular.

A massive evergreen tree was placed in the middle of the square, covered in gold and silver bobbles that reflected the cool morning rays. It was still dreadfully cold outside, but the cloudless sky allowed enough sun to take the bite out of the air and make the day enjoyable.

"How might I help you celebrate today, Mistress Evalie?" Emmett asked with a flourished bow at his waist.

"Mistress Evalie? Since when did I gain a title?"

"I'm sorry, I thought we established that you were a girl earlier?"

"I *am*, Sir Giftless, but I didn't enslave you," I said.

"Oh, am I free to leave then?"

"Absolutely not."

"Very well then, my benevolent master." He dipped his head again, and I took the opportunity to elbow him in the shoulder, nearly pushing him into a bank of snow. "Whoa! I thought Nigel required me to come back in one piece!"

"You can bruise an apple without slicing it up," I said with a teasing flick of my cloak. "And speaking of, there's a cider cart over there. Why don't you make yourself useful and enjoy some with me."

Emmett's brows knit together, building a shelf for a few snow flurries to cling to until he relaxed his face. "You busted me out of work, paid my salary, and made me your captive so I could be *useful* and drink cider with you? All right, fess up. What did you pay that cider seller to put in those drinks?"

"Hopefully, something strong. Then maybe you'll relax a little," I said. Emmett's mittened hand fit perfectly in mine as I dragged him toward the cart. The sweet smell of the spiced drinks wafted through the air as the steam from the giant vat of liquid danced across the snow. We stopped a half block away from the cart so

I could dig out a pair of copper coins, my hand jerking when I realized how tightly I'd been holding his mitten.

"It's a little hard to relax when you keep nearly pulling my arm out of its socket." Emmett chuckled as he massaged his shoulder, and I felt my cheeks flush.

"I know it may not be your preferred way to spend the day, but it's at least a little better than working the shop, right?" I felt a touch of shyness creep into my tone, but I cleared it with a quick cough. I'd been so excited to celebrate my rise from poverty that I'd barely even considered whether this would be any fun for Emmett. I mean, he was only Emmett, but I'd meant what I said about wanting to thank him.

I thought back to the odd little fruit cakes he had given me when he was likely just as short-changed for ingredients as I was. It made no sense that he would ever care about my well-being, yet he had still gone to the trouble to look after me in his own small ways. He was like an annoyingly bright star in the center of a constellation that you always ignored so you could see the big picture, but when that picture faded and the sky was clouded, that bright star was still looking down on you.

"Evalie, there's nowhere I'd rather be," he said with a surprisingly sweet voice. "You can drag me out of the shop anytime you'd like."

There he went again, acting all nice when I knew perfectly well that his true colors were naughty. We used to spend hours playing in this market square as children, and by *playing*, I meant stealing each other's things, pulling hair, and making up new insults for each other.

I purchased two mugs of piping-hot cider, and we wandered back toward the center of the square. It was quiet, but there were still lots of rosy-cheeked villagers wandering the square just like when I was a child. Some carried mugs of cider, others bushy green wreaths, and some simply walked hand in hand with their sweethearts. Memories tilted through my mind of playing in the snow under the great evergreen tree and building password-protected forts from boys until they smashed them in with tree branches.

"It's a lot quieter than I remember," I said as I held the mug under my nose, inhaling the spiced steam and warming my cheeks. "There used to always be children out this time of year."

"We've had many folks stop by the shop for medicine this week. There's some sort of illness going around, so I would gamble that many parents are keeping their children inside." Emmett took a long sip of his cider; his eyes blurred through the warm steam.

The word *illness* soured my stomach. It hadn't been long since that word was merely a sound, but now it only reminded me of my mother's death sentence. It wasn't more red fever, was it?

"I suppose children are good at spreading germs," I said with a stiff swallow. My hands went clammy despite being wrapped around the hot mug, and I felt dizzy. If sickness was going around again...who would it take next? The children weren't missing because they were already sick, were they? What if it infected someone at the shop? Like Nigel, or Emmett—

"Are you all right, Evalie?" Emmett's soft tone snapped me out of my thoughts. His brows pressed together so far they wrinkled his nose. "Your breathing just quickened."

*It did?*

I pressed a hand over my heart and nearly gasped when I felt how fast it was racing. I must have looked crazy to him at that moment, but his only look was one of unmeasurable concern.

“I-I’m sorry, I was just thinking about—” I couldn’t say it. Just thinking about the horrors of Mother’s death left my tongue stiff and my palms sweaty. She should have just been sick. Sick people got better. Except, she never did, and then she was gone. Would the children be gone, too? Was sickness always the end?

“It’s all right.” Emmett placed the lightest touch on my hand, but it still made me jump enough that a splash of cider sloshed out of my cup. He immediately withdrew his touch, but when our eyes met, I felt a pull in my chest, wishing he was still close, and as if reading my thoughts, he went back for another attempt. He took my hand, and I didn’t flinch this time as he tenderly pulled it away from my heart so I could feel the steadiness of his grip instead of the racing in my blood. “Would you like to take a walk around the square with me? We can talk as much or as little as you’d like.”

I nodded, grateful for the distraction from my embarrassing panic. Emmett had been given a golden opportunity to tease me, yet there he went again, considering my emotions.

*It's probably because he understands them just as well...*

I wondered how many times he’d panicked after losing his family.

“Do you remember when you pushed me into that well?” Emmett nodded toward the decorative well that sat beside the laundry mill. “You were so angry that it wasn’t real and that I didn’t even get wet.”

A soft smile tugged at the corner of my lips as I recalled how Mother had made me wash linens at the mill for the rest of the day as punishment for breaking the bucket off the decoration with Emmett’s big head.

“Or the time I told you that redheads were actually evil witches, so you caught a toad and dropped it down my shirt.” Emmett laughed. “Your mother thought it was so funny, she forgot to scold either of us.”

My lips twitched further up. I was looking for a snake, but all I could find was the silly toad.

Emmett noticed my smile, and his thin mitten tightened around mine. It took me a second to recognize what he was doing. He was bringing up fond memories that included my mother, so I could feel comfortable bringing her up if I wanted to talk about it but also leave her out of the conversation entirely if I didn’t.

It was a sweet and thoughtful calculation that only stirred my thoughts further. Was this simply a new Emmett?

“I did a lot of nasty things to you when we were children,” I said as my hand went limp in his. “I said a lot of terrible things about your lack of magic, too.”

“It’s not like I wasn’t asking for it.” He laughed. “We took great pride in tormenting each other.”

“Then why did you always come back for more?” I asked the playful question in a serious voice, my hand subconsciously tightening around his as I pulled him to a stop. Snow flurried around us, sticking to my eyelashes and collecting on top of our held hands. I wasn’t sure when I should let go of him, but it felt natural to

connect with him now. “I was terrible. Why offer me any kindness at all when I deserved to go through the same lonesome mourning you endured after losing your family?”

His smile softened, and those eyes burned into me like they had been holding back something that had finally been set free. “I was never alone when I lost my family, Evalie. You were right there, stealing my gloves, giving me new nicknames, and chasing me around the square.”

I squashed my brows together, trying to make sense of what he was describing. I’d been there for him, sure, but in the way a tick was there for a dog.

“Emmett, I was a brat to you. Occasionally, I still am.”

“Only occasionally?” He smirked.

“Watch it.” I glared at him, and he only laughed, swirling his drink in his hand and looking into the steam.

“You’re like this cider,” he said. “This drink is full of nutmeg, clove, cinnamon, allspice, and so many other things that it is almost too much to take in all at once. But I’ve grown to enjoy the taste. What used to be too many flavors has become comforting, warm, and familiar. The sweetness has always been there, but the spice is what makes me love it even more.”

The way our hands were touching changed after that. It was more than a gentle comfort Emmett had provided me in a moment of weakness; it was his way of conveying something so much more. My cheeks warmed, and my senses became acutely aware of the spices in my cup of cider. He loved those parts of me. He loved that I challenged him and overwhelmed him, despite how much I had tried to push him over the edge. I stared down into my cup, seeing the drink in a whole new way. It made sense because, in the same way he had grown to love those parts of me, I had always come back to him for the same reasons. It wasn’t until the funeral that I was confronted with the truth that we had both been enjoying the cider from the start.

*Perhaps we never hated each other at all.*

He had no magic, but our touch ignited mine. The warmth that rushed through my blood seemed to have its own tempo to it, soft and light, like a carol singing in my soul. I was able to hold back my urge to blush, but I couldn’t hold back the burst of magic that poured out of me. My gift searched eagerly for a vessel, latching on to the evergreen tree in the center of the square. Just like I had done with the garland over my fireplace, sparks of colored light scattered over the tree, illuminating the branches with a kaleidoscope of colors that reflected off of each gold and silver ornament. Every eye in the square turned to the tree, gasping in awe as they flocked around its base to view the beautiful lights.

The beauty of it shocked me. I never knew my gift had that much power behind it. The massive evergreen was like a beacon of the joy I couldn’t process within my own body. It was beautiful, chaotic, and something I wanted to take a closer look at.

Emmett squeezed my hand, and every light beamed brighter for a second as my heart skipped a beat. “See? How could I not be drawn to you when you make the world so much brighter?”

I met his eyes, and they were waiting for me with a smile that went back so much further than the day of the funeral. How long had he felt like this? How long had he thought about me as more than the irritating girl who lived down the street?



Something stirred inside me, and it wasn't the spiced drink. I thought back to Emmett's kindness. I thought back to my wish for a miracle. All I had wanted was to be cared for again, like my mother had always done for me, and not to fear being alone with nothing.

Emmett had nothing, but he never felt alone.

In my darkest moment, he'd been there with a flower and a fruit cake. How could I have missed the miracle that was already right in front of me?

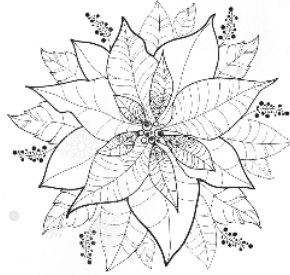
*I was never alone, either.*

I shifted forward, my eyes locked with his as our latched hands felt like too weak of a touch. I wasn't sure what I was doing or what my heart was telling me, but the glowing lights were burning just as bright on the outside as they were inside me. He leaned forward, no words passing between us. I started to step forward to close the distance with another crunch of snow.

"Evalie? Is that you?" A familiar voice startled us apart and I dropped Emmett's hand. The lights all flashed white with my shock, then shifted back to the colors, earning a delighted gasp from the crowd. My heart rammed into my ribs as I met the curious amber eyes glancing between Emmett and me.

"Alfie."

## Chapter Thirteen



I hadn't done anything wrong, but for some reason, my face was hotter than a roasted chestnut. Alfie, on the other hand, seemed completely at ease. His hands were stuffed into his pockets, his thin jacket was dusted with snow, and his relaxed smile settled on Emmett and me.

Emmett looked about as puzzled as a man who had just been interrupted by a stranger could expect to be. His gaze wandered all over Alfie's attire, looking at him and around him like he expected there to be another strange man with no shoes popping around the corner to say hello.

"Sorry to interrupt you," Alfie said with a slightly squinted smile directed at Emmett. "I was just in town when I recognized your magic and thought you might be nearby." He pointed at the sparkling tree, and I felt my face flush as red as the ribbons on its branches.

"Oh, yes. I suppose that would get anyone's attention," I said as I reached for a stray curl of my hair. "Sorry for acting startled. I hadn't expected to see you out in the town since you're typically only around at night."

"I noticed it's been pretty quiet around town lately," Alfie said. "I figured with fewer people around, there wouldn't be as many folks that I could bother." He looked down at his shoeless feet buried ankle-deep in the snow. His pant legs were soaked, and I could only imagine how painfully red his feet were.

*Are people that judgmental of him?*

"You're never a bother," I said with an earnest smile. He returned it, and I felt my spirits lift alongside his.

"Um, Evalie?" Emmett tugged on my sleeve, stepping up alongside me in an almost protective manner as he narrowed his eyes at Alfie. It took me a moment to piece together why Emmett was being so stand-offish.

*That's right! They've never met.*

"Oh! Where are my manners? Emmett, this is Alfie. Alfie, Emmett." I gestured to the two men, but Emmett didn't relax with introductions alone. He glared at Alfie like a hawk trying to calculate where his prey was planning to flee. "Emmett, Alfie is the gentleman I've been telling you about. He's the one who saved my business."

The aggression faded from Emmett's eyes immediately. His shoulders relaxed, his mouth hung slightly open, and he seemed to see Alfie with brand-new eyes that hadn't quite decided what they were looking at. "I see..."

Alfie stepped toward Emmett and held out his filthy-gloved hand to Emmett with a charming grin. Emmett continued to study him, his hands never reaching out to accept Alfie's until Alfie awkwardly dropped it and stuffed it back into his pocket.

"It's nice to meet you," Alfie said with a clearing of his throat. Once again, Emmett didn't reply.

I hadn't seen him act this rude since we were children and he'd told me my hair looked like a witch had cursed it. He just stared at Alfie like maybe he wasn't a stranger after all.

"Evalie?" Emmett shifted his attention toward me. "How long have you and Alfie known each other?"

I looked back at Alfie, and he tilted his head thoughtfully. The question didn't seem to bother him, but neither of us really had a clear answer. We'd first seen each other at the funeral, but our introductions weren't made until I caught him in my shop.

"Since he started growing the flowers for me," I said as I averaged out an answer. "We had our first conversation the night I told you I had discovered where the flowers were coming from."

Emmett bit the edge of his lip with a soft nod as he looked back in Alfie's direction. "I see. So he's the one who was breaking in?"

The tension in the air was thicker than the rolls of steam floating down my mug. Alfie stiffened, but he didn't back down either. He lifted his chin, meeting Emmett square in the eye even though Emmett wouldn't quite meet his.

"Yes, and I'm greatly sorry for any discomfort I have caused Evalie or those who care about her," Alfie said. "All I ever wanted, and all I *still* want, is to be of help to those who have shown me kindness when I didn't deserve it. I care very much for Evalie, and despite what you may assume, my intentions were never to endanger her."

Emmett remained unmoved, though his attention had shifted to me, like he was watching to see what kind of impact Alfie's words left on me. I'd never seen Emmett act this way before, but after seeing more of him today, I was starting to understand why he felt so protective.

"Alfie, you're not dangerous," I said in a gentle tone as I approached the man who had selflessly saved me from starvation. "I know you're not. You've done nothing but give ever since I've met you."

"He gives you flowers...?" Emmett seemed to be piecing our relationship together one step at a time, the tense twist in his features tightening like a jammed cog in a wheel. "And he brings them to you every night?"

I hadn't thought about it much until now, but my and Alfie's relationship sounded a bit more amorous than it actually was when you had all the facts. My cheeks flushed, and Alfie seemed equally flustered as he read my thoughts.

"Oh, no." Alfie held his hands up. "It's not like that! I mean, I do give her flowers. But it's not like—"

“The flowers come from a gift, correct?” Emmett cut off Alfie before he could dig himself any deeper into a pit of misunderstandings.

“Yes, his magic is like my mother’s.” I took over, letting Alfie catch his breath. “I know it sounds odd, but he really is harmless.” My heart hammered as I watched this information sink into Emmett like a plank of wood trying to sink in a pond.

*Why do I want Emmett to like him so badly? It shouldn’t matter what he thinks of Alfie, or what Alfie thinks of Emmett.*

I looked between the two men, my heart tugging toward both of them for different reasons I couldn’t explain.

“I understand,” Emmett said in a voice that wasn’t nearly as convincing as his words. “It’s nice to meet you, Alfie.”

*This isn’t off to a good start.*

“Are you all right?” I asked Emmett. I wasn’t sure what emotion I was expecting to see when he looked at me—certainly not the fear I now saw in his face.

“I’m fine.” He forced a smile that tightened around his lie. “Though it’s getting late. May I walk you home, Evalie?”

*That’s it?*

I looked back at Alfie, my heart breaking for him as he gave me an understanding smile. I could see why Emmett wouldn’t immediately trust Alfie, but did he have to be so dismissive of him?

“Go ahead. I can always stop by again tonight.” Alfie eyed Emmett as if challenging him to say something about his late-night visits, but Emmett remained quiet.

“I would like that.” I smiled at Alfie, my heart fluttering at the thought of being able to explain things to him tonight about why Emmett was so protective. “I’ll see you tonight.” I turned back to Emmett and took his extended arm to start walking back to my shop.

Emmett glanced back one more time at Alfie, then never again as he walked with me through the thick layer of snow. He didn’t say anything at first, leaving a chilly quiet between us until he took in a long breath and tensed his arm.

“Evalie? You don’t think...that Alfie’s a little strange, do you?” The question felt like a jab as I thought back to Alfie’s lack of footwear and generally rugged state.

Was that what bothered him? Did he think Alfie was trying to take advantage of my warm home at night?

“Not really, do you?” I asked the question tartly, mildly offended in Alfie’s honor. Emmett was an orphan, too, and a giftless one at that. He should have understood how hard it was to get by on your own.

Though he managed to do it without any magic at all—was that why he was so judgmental of Alfie?

Emmett didn’t reply at first. A brisk wind whistled through the trees, dusting up whirlwinds of snow and sending a shiver across my neck. We approached the shop, the green door a welcome sight after an afternoon in the frigid air. Emmett stopped a few feet shy of the door, his body tense and his eyes serious as if he was searching for the words he needed to say and not the words he wanted to say.

“Do you enjoy his company? Alfie’s?”

The question struck me as odd, but he sounded like he genuinely wanted to know.

“I do,” I admitted, finding it easy to say as I thought back to his kind heart and thoughtful actions. “He makes me feel...he makes me feel like I did when Mother was still around. He’s comforting and consistent, and his presence makes my home feel less empty on cold nights.”

*I don’t care if he’s strange. Just like Emmett, he was there with a miracle when I needed one most.*

Emmett smiled, a real one that was full of both relief and poorly hidden fragments of pain. “Then there’s nothing strange about him,” he said softly. “I’m glad he’s been there for you.”

So many emotions poured through me. I was relieved that Emmett seemed willing to accept Alfie, but also concerned that it pained him to do so. I wanted there to be room for both of them in my life, so why did it feel like accepting one meant rejecting the other?

We stepped inside and my skin tingled as the warm air sank into my cold bones. I invited Emmett inside so we could reheat our cider and continue chatting, but before I could get to the kettle, something else caught my eye.

“Flowers!” I gasped, rushing over to the bursting red flowers that hadn’t been there when I’d left. I looked around the shop, noticing the other items from my purchase this morning had been placed on the dining table. Someone had already planted my seeds and now they’d grown. “That must be why Alfie was in town... He already came by and grew the flowers for me.”

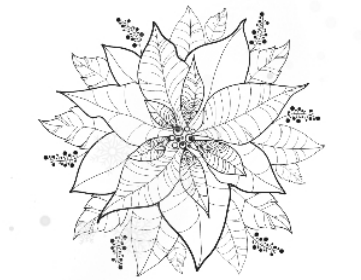
My heart beamed, but Emmett didn’t seem to share my joy as he cautiously approached the blooms.

“So he sneaks into your house during the day, too?” he asked, leaning over to smell the biggest of the blooms.

“He was probably coming by to see me,” I reasoned as I grabbed the kettle to dump the contents of our mugs inside. I’d return them to the vendor tomorrow, but for now I wanted to enjoy an evening in. “I know his methods are a bit...odd, but he truly means no harm. He couldn’t hurt a fly.”

He leaned away from the flower, glancing up and down the bloom one final time before meeting my gaze with an attempt at a relaxed smile. “You’re right, Evalie. I’m sure he’s nothing to be concerned about.”

## Chapter Fourteen



I waited up for Alfie, burning time by tossing tiny sticks into the fire and watching them pop. The flowers cast long shadows over the window, making it look like an army of scraggly men were waiting outside. Shadows like that might have frightened me if I didn't already feel so safe.

Alfie would be with me shortly, and whenever he was around, everything just felt at peace. I approached the flowers, hoping I could see out the window to watch for Alfie's arrival, but the firelight on the inside made the glass as black as obsidian. I turned my attention to the flowers, illuminating the magic in my veins to bless each bloom with a touch more beauty. I immersed myself in the task, not even noticing when a familiar presence stepped through the door.

"Incredible." Alfie's awed voice tickled my ears, buzzing my magic as I turned back to meet his adoring gaze. "I was hoping for a chance to see how our gifts worked together."

"Is that why you stopped by earlier?" I asked, stepping around the display of flowers to greet him. "So you could see me use my gift on the flowers?"

He ran a hand through his dark locks with a shy smirk that made me feel fuzzy inside. "Everyone in town kept saying how beautiful the flowers from this shop were. I knew it couldn't be just from my gift. You're the one who truly brings the magic."

He approached the blooms, cupping his hand under the petals and taking in their scent as he admired their magical sparkle.

"My gift is nothing without yours," I said as I crept up beside him, only an inch away. "I can't create like you can."

"Anyone can create," he said, turning to meet my eyes. He was just tall enough that I had to look up not to stare him in the chin. "But not everyone can captivate." He leaned down, his nose hovering above mine so close they were nearly brushing. I held my breath as I lost myself in the adoring look he pinned me with. "Do you realize how much you captivate everyone, Evalie?"

He said it so calmly as if it were a simple fact and not something that could make a girl's heart try to jump out of her throat. "I don't know what to say to that..."

I didn't know anything about what was happening at that moment. I didn't know how I felt about Alfie being so close, or about my heart beating so fast. Or even how I felt a little guilty for thinking of Emmett at that moment.

"You don't have to say anything," he said as he backed away, stealing my breath while drawing out the distance between us, making me wish he'd come back. "You just have to know it."

He walked around the display of flowers, moving toward the fire to warm his palms. I hadn't even noticed how drafty the window was until he stepped away. His uncovered feet drew my eye. His socks looked even more worn than the last time I'd seen them, with a few of his toes poking through a fraying hole. It pained me to see him living without simple necessities while I had just spent the day showering Emmett with my new coins. I wondered why he refused to allow me to share my profits with him when he could truly use some of the money.

Alfie followed my gaze, and I tensed as I realized how shamelessly I'd been staring at his abused feet. "So, your friend Emmett," he said as he curled and uncurled his toes. "He seems nice. I'm sorry if I gave a poor impression to him. I'm not really the type that people introduce their friends to."

"No, that's not what it was!" I assured him, rushing around the potted plants to meet him by the fire. "It wasn't you that he was bothered by. Well...it was *you*, but not for the reasons you're thinking! He was just worried about me because—"

"Because I sneak into your house at night?" Alfie let out a belittling laugh as he fiddled with his hands. "I don't blame him for being suspicious. He's a good friend to question me."

The word *friend* lingered on his lips for a moment longer than the rest. He turned his attention toward the fire, then buried his hands in his pockets with a long exhale. I stared at those hidden hands for a moment longer than I needed to, remembering how warm and natural Emmett's hand had felt in mine.

*Would Alfie's touch feel that way too?*

"He wasn't always what I would call a friend," I said as I sank onto the fireplace rug, propping my chin on my knees as I leaned into the warmth. "I was pretty awful to him when we were children. As difficult as it is to believe, I haven't always been likable."

Alfie joined me on the rug, his hand painfully close to mine as he leaned back on his palms. "You? Less than perfect? Nope, couldn't imagine it." He winked. "Well...maybe if I tried really hard..."

"I don't think that's necessary."

"Are you sure? I'd hate to get the wrong impression of you."

"What's wrong with the impression you have now?" I raised a brow.

"That's the problem." He laughed. "Nothing. There's nothing wrong with how I see you now. Tell me about everything I'm missing." He rested his cheek on his knees, his face angled to look at me.

"Spend enough time with me, and I won't have to tell you," I said, my heart fluttering under his direct gaze. His hazel eyes danced with the red flames like the most beautiful stream of light peering through dark glass candy.

"Is that an option?" He chuckled, but the question resonated in me.

Was it an option?

I looked back at his worn socks, tattered clothes, and cracked hands. What if I could spend more time with him? Mother had once offered to let him stay with us.

“Would you want to?” I asked, my voice soft and earnest as I watched his pupils gently dilate. “Spend more time with me, that is. It’s only me living here, and clearly I trust you enough to come into my home as you please. Would you want to stay here with me?”

*Was that a foolish thing to consider?*

My heart beat harder than a hammer drilling down nails. I wasn’t sure which surprised me more, that I was asking Alfie to stay with me or that I hadn’t offered before. He was homeless, roughing it out in the elements every day while I sat warm and cozy by the fire, living off the benefits of his magic.

“Thank you, Evalie,” he said. “But I couldn’t.”

“Why not?” I frowned.

“It’s improper enough that I come by so late at night,” he said, nodding at the black window. “Emmett already worries about you enough.”

*Is that what he’s worried about? Emmett?*

“There’s nothing improper about it.” Despite my argument, a swirl of heat raced up my cheeks at the thought. “Besides, you’re already here at night. Being here during the day would be even less improper, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” he admitted with a humored sigh. “But I’m sure you’ve noticed, I don’t mesh well with *proper* company. That’s why I tend to come out more at night.”

“You’re worried about what other people will think of you?”

“I’m worried about what they’ll think of *you*,” he said with a slight crack in his voice. “I’m here to help you, Evalie, not burden you. I’m happy to do that in the quiet of night if that’s what it takes.”

“Alfie...” I shifted closer to him, itching to reach for his hand but too shy to move. Holding hands with Emmett had been so easy, but reaching for Alfie felt like crossing over a cavern with no bridge. What was I supposed to do when they both lured me closer? “You’re never a burden.”

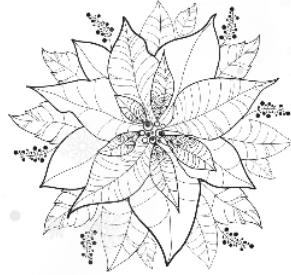
“And I never intend to be, but thank you for the offer.” He shifted in front of the fire, his worn socks creeping close enough to the flames that they couldn’t possibly be damp anymore. “I’ll think about it.”

I nodded as my flying hopes came crashing back down. Hearing that Alfie would rather freeze in the cold than damage my reputation broke my heart. He didn’t deserve to be homeless while I was living a carefree life.

I looked back at his feet, my mind whirling as I imagined how something as simple as a pair of shoes might change people’s perspective of him. Alfie had healed my soul in more ways than one; perhaps it was time that I warmed his soles in exchange.



## Chapter Fifteen



Alfie stepped out after I fell asleep again. The bright white world reflecting off the sun roused me awake, greeting me with a beautiful snowy scene outside my window. I looked at the untouched snow, unable to find Alfie's footprints now that they had been filled in with the fresh dusting. With any luck, those footprints would change tonight.

I opened the shop and quickly sold the newest flowers Alfie had left me. With a pocket full of coins and the Day of Giving on my mind, I raced to Nigel's store for some holiday shopping. My feet flew through the snow as I thought of seeing Emmett. We'd had such a wonderful afternoon together the previous day. I needed to get him a gift, too.

When I arrived at the store, it was completely empty except for Nigel standing behind the counter. He waved at me, undoubtedly happy to see his favorite customer right on schedule. I waved back, then wandered the shelves in search of Emmett hunched down restocking carrots or quills, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"He took the day off," Nigel called to me as I popped up from behind the seed shelf. "It's all your fault for giving him a taste of freedom. Now the boy has gone and decided he needs another break." He laughed, but a twist in my gut made it difficult for me to share his humor.

"He didn't come in?" I asked, thinking back to how we'd ended our conversation yesterday. He never missed a day of work... He wasn't trying to avoid seeing me, was he? "Did he say why?"

"Afraid not." Nigel shrugged. "Though there's been enough sickness going around, I wouldn't be surprised if it caught up to him."

That didn't make me feel any better. The sinking feeling in my gut worsened, and I swallowed hard to keep the fear from creeping up my throat. Emmett couldn't be sick... But if he wasn't, then why wasn't he here? I was not too fond of any of this.

He'll be back tomorrow, right? There's nothing to worry about.

I took a long breath, clearing my mind and pushing the bad thoughts away. There was no reason to assume the worst. Maybe Nigel was right, and he simply realized that he deserved the occasional day off. Or if he was avoiding me, it

wouldn't change my plans for the day. Getting him a gift would only help smooth over whatever bothered him. If he was sick...

He can't be sick.

As I approached the counter, I smashed the last of those thoughts down and crushed them under my boot. "That's all right. I planned to get him a gift anyway. It's probably good that he's not here, so it can be a surprise."

"A gift, hmm?" Nigel gave me a knowing grin. "First, you take the lad out for the day, and now you're buying him presents? You know he already talks about you all the time. You don't have to try that hard to win him over."

"No, I—"

"I'm not here to poke into your business." Nigel winked. "But if you need any ideas, he's been eyeing these gloves for a while..." He directed me to a pair of fitted leather gloves on the back wall.

I wasn't done defending my intentions, but the gloves were fairly eye-catching, so I followed him to start browsing. Emmett's mittens had seemed a bit thin yesterday. Nigel pulled the gloves off the shelf and handed them to me to inspect.

"These are rather nice," I said as I turned the gloves over in my hands. The leather was thick and lined with fur inside, making it impossible for heat to escape. The stitching was tight and clean, sure to last a long time, but the plain black color was a bit bland for a gift. "I wouldn't mind getting him something useful, but this doesn't feel like a very personal gift."

"Personal, hmm?" Nigel gave me another sly look, and I rolled my eyes. "I'm assuming this would be for the Day of Giving, yes?"

He must have had the furnace blasting in that shop because my face started feeling hotter than a crossed bun. "Yes, though I might give it to him sooner." I considered as I thought about my plans to give a gift to Alfie.

"I see. I think those gloves would work well in that case, but you need to add the finishing touch." He tapped the gloves, his gift sparking on his fingertips but not fully enacting. "The Day of Giving is about sharing magic, is it not?"

Magic? I suppose I never thought of gifting Emmett magic since he has none.

I looked down at the gloves, summoning my gift to whirl to life and flow through the stiff leather. The black faded to a steel grey, and patterns of white snowflakes spread across the stitches, embroidering the leather with a beautiful contrast against the dark color. I let my magic fizzle out, holding up the newly decorated gloves and earning an impressed whistle from Nigel.

"Now that's a gift," he said.

"Except that my magic is temporary," I said as disappointment crashed over me. "They look nice now, but in a few days, the illusion will fade, and he'll have plain old gloves again."

I couldn't give anything real. It only worked on flowers because everyone already expected their beauty to fade. Giving Emmett these would only get his hopes up and then take them away.

"Even better," Nigel said with an optimism I couldn't quite follow. "It's a gift that keeps on giving. If the magic only lasts a few days, he'll have to keep coming back to you to get another round of your gift. The more he's around you, the more beautiful his present becomes."

I stared down at the decorated gloves, my cheeks growing uncomfortably warm again as I thought of Emmett always coming back to me. I'd never thought of using my magic as a way to draw people to me, but the more I tossed it around in my mind, the more I liked it.

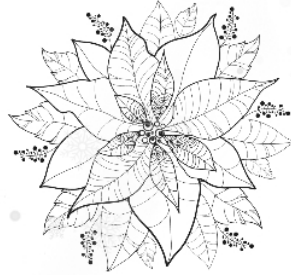
He wouldn't have to come back to me. They were just a pair of silly gloves, after all, but if he wanted to, he always could. I didn't have to give him something that lasted forever, but I could always promise to give him whatever I had.

"You're a mighty fine salesman, you know?" I said as I started digging out my coin pouch from my pocket.

"I do my best," he chuckled. "If you buy a second pair, I might even throw in a free scarf."

"I think I'll pass on the scarf, but..." I turned my attention to a pair of leather boots on the floor, my excitement growing as I imagined using my gift on them next. "I'll take those boots, too."

## Chapter Sixteen



The snow was starting to come down heavy and fast, so I hurried home before I could be buried in a snow bank. I stepped inside the shop, instantly relaxed by the scent of tossed soil and a crackling fire. It was a smell that used to fill our home when I'd had Mother at my side and all was right in the world. The soil had dried out when she passed, and the fire burned down. I'd been afraid I would never experience this comfort again.

But here I was, needing to toss logs in the fire and sweep dirt off the rug. I had never realized what a gift chores could be until there had been nothing left to do but sit and freeze. It was incredible how many forms a gift could take. Gifts were magic, they were privileges, and they were acts of kindness.

I unpacked the gloves and boots I had purchased, thinking of the two men who had given to me in more ways than I ever could have imagined. The dazzling snowflake embroidery drew my eye to the gloves, and I imagined Emmett's hands being kept warm and snug inside the leather. He may have been without magic, but he knew plenty about giving gifts. I could only hope I would see him before the Day of Giving to return all the kindness he'd offered me.

I set the gloves aside and focused on the plain brown boots. Like the gloves, they were of impeccable quality but were far too simple for all the gratitude I wished to convey. I hovered my palms over the boots, letting out a long breath as I channeled my gift into the tight leather stitching.

My thoughts filled with memories of Alfie. His charming smile, his dark hair that always had specks of snow in it, his magic that reminded me of my mother, and all of the other beautiful things about him, I pushed into those simple shoes.

The magic felt too strong to be contained in the leather, rolling off of me like flecks of snow being shaken off an evergreen. I closed my eyes, trying to control it better, and when I opened them, the results were breathtaking.

The simple brown leather had been completely transformed. The top of the boot was now a dark green, decorated with the bloodred flowers Alfie had always brought me. The laces were replaced with velvet ties, and the toes of the boots were slightly curled at the end, giving it an almost whimsical look. They looked like they'd jumped straight out of a children's book, but not because they were childish. The colors were impossibly vibrant, and the embroidery was so precise that it

should have been reserved for royalty.

They were every bit as striking as Emmett's gloves. Excitement hummed in my ribcage as I remembered what Nigel had said about the gifts. If they wanted them to stay beautiful, they'd have to keep coming back to me.

My cheeks flushed, but my soul felt warmer than the red soles on the boots. Seasons changed, and flowers didn't always sell, but now Alfie would always have a reason to come see me. He hadn't been in my life for long, but now I couldn't imagine my life without him.

"Wow." Alfie's voice brushed my senses like the soft tickle of a pine needle on the back of my neck. I loved how he could sneak up on me like a comforting breeze. "Those are magnificent."

I'd grown used to him popping in without a sound. He had no soles to click on the floors, after all. His approaching voice was a welcome sound, lifting my heart so high I found myself leaning forward on my toes. I turned around to face him, his signature dusting of snow nearly bleaching his dark hair from the brewing storm outside. He dusted off his head, and the snow vanished before it hit the ground in the warm air.

My home always felt complete when he was here. Like a missing puzzle piece had been returned to a picture I couldn't look away from.

"You like them?" I asked, barely keeping back the giddiness dancing on my tongue.

"How could I not?" Alfie asked as he approached the shoes to give them a closer look. "You're remarkable, Evalie. First flowers, and now shoes? Your talents never cease to amaze me."

He always knew how to make me glow. I averted my gaze as a shy pride swept over me. Seeing him love the shoes was all I could ever hope for.

"I'm glad you like them, because they're yours." I pushed the shoes toward him and watched as he stared at me like I had just told him he was descended from royalty.

"What?" His lips parted, an emotional smile threatening to pull at his lips but still too unbelieving to break free.

"They're yours," I repeated. "I understand that you don't feel comfortable staying with me, and I respect your decision, but I still wanted to find a way to express my gratitude to you. It's not much, but I thought you might enjoy having warm feet."

"N-not much?" Alfie brushed a hand down his gaping mouth and rested it on his chin as he admired the boots. "Evalie...I can't accept these. You should sell these and take care of yourself or give them to someone you care about, or—"

"Alfie." I placed my hands on the shoes and pushed them across the table so they were directly under his nose. "I care about *you*."

He went quiet, his eyes glassy as he looked up at me instead of the shoes. The same look of astonishment he'd given the boots was now directed at me, burning me from the inside out like an everlasting yule log.

"You...do?" His voice was as delicate as a snowflake.

I stepped around the table, drawing closer to him like there was a string in my heart tugging me in his direction. There was no denying what I felt for Alfie now, even if I couldn't fully interpret it myself. He had found me when I was cold,

starving, and alone. At the time, he was a stranger and a mystery I wasn't sure was safe to unravel. But the pull I felt toward him was unlike any other. Alfie held a piece of me, and if he wanted me to take care of myself, that included the parts he occupied.

"Very much." I felt my lips quiver as I spoke, the small confession feeling as large as a mountain as I looked up into Alfie's soulful gaze. "More than I can say. I can't explain it, Alfie, but you've claimed a permanent place in my heart. They're just shoes, but maybe having them with you will let me be on your mind a little, too."

He didn't look at the shoes. He was too focused on me. His lips had a thousand unspoken words, but I wish he would speak just one. He looked almost lost, like he couldn't possibly fathom what I offered him.

"Evalie..." He breathed my name like it was the only thing he needed to survive. "I adore you, but I'm not someone worth caring about. I can't offer you anything more than who I am now."

*Alfie...*

I reached for his hand, but he pulled it back just an inch so that I couldn't take it. I backed off, my heart cleaving from my chest as he gave me a broken smile.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, clutching his hand to his chest. "I'm afraid I'll only disappoint you."

He looked so torn, his hand closed tight into a fist like he was at war with himself. I wished he hadn't pulled back. I craved his touch. I wanted to comfort and reassure him, but this wasn't about what I wanted. It was about what Alfie needed.

"You're enough, Alfie," I said gently. "Who you are now is all I want you to be. You don't have to grow flowers, stay with me, or even accept these shoes. All I want is you, Alfie. Exactly as you are."

He dropped his hands to his sides; his fists clenched so tight I could see his knuckles turning white through the patches in his gloves.

"You can't say things like that to me, Evalie..." He took a step closer, his scent intoxicating me with the tang of pine and a hint of cinnamon. "If you keep telling me these things, I'll want to believe they're real."

I braced my hand on the tabletop next to me, holding myself back from reaching out to him, no matter how badly I desired to do so. "They are real."

He looked pained, as if the thought of me caring for him was a curse that chained him down. I couldn't understand it. Did he not care for me in the same way? Maybe I had misinterpreted his actions and words.

"But if you don't want me to care about you"—I paused, biting my lip as I forced the words off my tongue—"then it doesn't have to be real."

"It's not that I don't want it," Alfie said, his voice so low it was almost a growl. "It's that—" He stopped himself, turning his face away from me with his lips pressed and eyes squeezed before meeting my gaze again with a fierce determination. "I care about you, too, Evalie. You have no idea how much you mean to me; truly, you don't."

My breath caught, and I felt myself drift another inch closer to him as if to a magnet. "I don't understand," I whispered. "If I mean that much to you, then why won't you accept my gratitude? You could stay here with me, share my coins, or at the very least keep your feet warm in the snow."

"I want all of those things," he said, his face drawing closer to mine, causing my heart to stutter. "But there's a reason why I didn't accept them."

"Why?" I looked up at him through my lashes, though I felt the urge to let them close. He was so close. I could practically taste his lips, his warm breath tingling against my cheek as he shifted his mouth closer to my ear.

"Isn't it obvious?" he said with a muscle-tensing whisper. "I'm struggling to keep my distance. I want to be near you too badly, Evalie, and I know that if I get too close, you won't want me near ever again."

His eyes fluttered shut, his hands twitching at his sides as his lips floated agonizingly close to mine. The pounding in my heart became relentless as nerves tangled me in knots like twisted tinsel.

"What if I want you to be closer?" I asked, my lips burning for some sort of contact.

"Don't say that, Evalie." His feet shifted, fighting to pull away but unable to take a full step back.

"Too late."

He took in a sharp breath, and I shut my eyes, my entire body tensing as I awaited the touch I so desperately craved. The moments of silence that followed were agonizing. I'd been dreaming of Alfie's touch for a week, itching to be closer to him and know how deep my feelings for him were.

I wasn't even sure if I was ready to kiss him, but if the burning temptation was any sign of what my heart desired, then it was plenty for me to lean into. I waited with bated breath as I sensed his lips draw nearer, my mind only imagining how close his embrace was.

A moment passed, and then another, then my body turned as cold as the snow outside as he slowly pulled back, his face twisted in agony as he let out a heavy sigh.

"I should go," he said in a defeated voice that crushed me from the inside out. "Good night, Evalie."

*What? No!*

"Alfie, wait a second—"

He stopped by the door, giving me a warm smile that did an excellent job of masking his pain. "Walk me out?" he asked sweetly, but the request felt like a kick in the gut after the rejection I'd just experienced.

I couldn't speak. I merely opened the door for him and didn't bother stepping out on the front stoop. My silence unmasked his pain. His shoulders sank as he looked down at his uncovered feet.

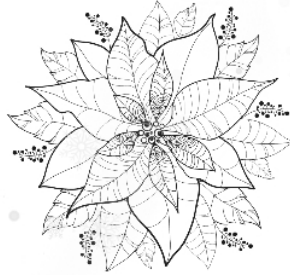
"I'm sorry, Evalie. If I could be enough for you, then maybe this could be real."

"It is real," I said with a tight throat. It was real to me, though admittedly, I needed to stop and consider Alfie. As much as I wanted him in my arms, he wasn't used to being embraced with kindness.

*I wish I could show him he's worthy of the warmth he gifts others.*

His hand twitched, and his eyes fixed on me as if he were still resisting the urge to pull me close. "If you still feel it's real on the Day of Giving, tell me." His gaze drifted toward my parted lips. "I think I'd be ready to give you a gift then."

## Chapter Seventeen



I fell asleep in my bed that night. Sleeping by the fire felt too cozy when I knew Alfie was back in the cold. I tossed and turned all night, tussling up my quilt and tangling my legs. I couldn't stop thinking about Alfie's proposed *gift* or the moments leading up to it.

I brushed a finger across my burning lips, nearly jumping from the cool pads of my fingertips. He had almost kissed me, and I had almost kissed him back. The butterflies surging in me were a mess of nerves and exhilaration. For an almost-first kiss, it was surprisingly overwhelming. I had always imagined a first kiss to be sweet and serene, but my memories with Alfie were heart-racing and electrifying. Had I even wanted to kiss him? Or was I just enthralled by the thought of it?

Even without being in front of the fire, I felt hot. Dreams of me creaking open the door and watching Alfie walk out into the snow danced in my mind. His footsteps echoed in the back of my brain, no matter how much I tried to block out my thoughts and stay asleep. When morning finally came, I was ready to be out of bed.

The floor was frosty under my bare toes, sending a sharp shiver up my spine with every step I took. When I got downstairs, I nearly choked on the smoky air as a row of bright-red flowers blazed at me in the morning sun. The leftover pine branches I'd been burning tended to leave a haze in the room that refused to go up the chimney, but I didn't care when I had a row of flowers greeting me through the fog.

*He still used his gift for me... Oh, Alfie.*

He must have used his magic while I wasn't looking, or those footsteps last night wouldn't have been in my dreams. Had he come back just to ensure my shop was taken care of?

With a heavy sigh, I approached the flowers. They were so incredible, just like their creator. If only he could see that he was as worthy of love as his magic was. I didn't need to kiss Alfie to show him what he meant to me, but I wished I could have at least given him a fraction of the comfort he had gifted me.

I looked back at the beautiful leather shoes that had been left out on the table. He hadn't taken them...but that didn't mean he never would. Maybe someday I could warm his soles in the same way he warmed my heart.



Looking at the detailed boots suddenly brought Emmett's gloves to my mind. I nearly jumped out of my stockings as I remembered how he hadn't been at work the previous day. My gift to Alfie may have been a failure, but perhaps giving Emmett his gift would smooth over anything that may have kept him from wanting to see me.

I grabbed the gloves from the shelf and did a quick wrapping job with some of the newsprint I kept for the flowers. Before heading out, I opened up the shop and waved in the customers who were lingering by the entrance. It never took long to sell out of flowers, so I waited around until all ten made it out the door, then closed up shop to find Emmett.

The customers' footprints muddied the clean snow with flecks of grass and dirt, leaving a gross brown slush on my doorstep. I tiptoed around it as best as I could, then started my daily walk toward the shop. Despite the rush of shoppers I'd seen in the morning, hardly anyone was out in the square. The streets were quiet, not all the shops were open despite it being peak season, and even the vendors from the other day weren't out selling cider or spiced nuts.

I hurried into Nigel's shop, keeping the wrapped gloves tucked safely inside my cloak so the package was out of sight. The shop at least had a few folks in it, most of them huddled around the corner of the store where the dried herbs and remedies were.

"Hello, there, Miss Makera." Nigel gave me a friendly wave from behind the counter as he magically packaged a vial of dark-blue liquid for a customer. "There you are, madame."

"Thank you, sir." The woman handed over a gold coin and hastily rushed out the door with her package.

Another customer came up with a bottle of her own and a few packs of dried herbs; *medicinal* herbs. My stomach dropped. The town was still so quiet. Was the sickness spreading further?

*Emmett... It couldn't be.*

"Nigel!" I rushed to the counter, nearly barreling over an older woman as I smacked my hands on the rough countertop. "Is Emmett here? Did he come back yesterday?"

*He's fine. I'm sure he's fine.*

"Hold it there, missy. You need to wait your turn." The older woman jabbed her thumb behind her as she impatiently waited for Nigel to wrap her purchase.

"I'm only asking a question," I argued, my heart pounding too frantically to wait for the answer. "Where's Emmett? Is he here?"

Nigel slid the wrapped goods across the table to the woman, and his salesman-like smile dropped when he met my eyes. "I'm afraid not." The simple words sickened me more than any fever, and my lungs clamped shut as I watched the next customer walk up with another bottle of medicine. "I finally got a message from him yesterday afternoon that he was in bed sick."

*No...*

"Sick?" Everything went blurry as memories of Mother chewed me up. "How sick?"

Emmett couldn't be sick. He was too hard of a worker to lie in bed all day. He was only joking around.

*He's fine, right? Emmet has to be fine.*

"I'm guessing he caught it while he was out in town the other day," Nigel admitted with a long sigh. "He has a nasty case of red fever."

*Red fever.*

I stumbled back, my vision blurred and my throat tight like I had just stepped into a cloud of dense smoke. Red fever had stolen my mother. Red fever had taken everything from me once before. Red fever was the name of the villain that could take it all over again.

*And I'm the one who took him out in town.*

Nigel continued checking out the last two customers while I tried to steady my breathing. Now was not the time to panic. Red fever wasn't typically deadly. I had survived it, and many others had, too. Emmet was strong.

*Mother was strong, too...*

The panic seized me, and I found my feet carrying me over to the shelf of medicines and herbs. Nigel was well stocked on all of it, thankfully. There were elixirs, both those made by doctors with healing gifts and ones that were more natural; special teas; herb mixes; and everything else someone with red fever could need. Most of these remedies had been around when Mother was ill, too, but she'd insisted that she didn't need them until it was too late.

"Do you know what medicines Emmett already has?" I called over to Nigel, who had just finished checking out the last customer.

"I don't believe he's gotten anything yet," Nigel called back, and my stomach knotted. "Despite it being in high demand, medicine isn't cheap. I have to have them shipped in from the neighboring city, Mistlen, since we don't have any locals with healing gifts."

Emmett hadn't had any remedies? How long did it take a virus to become unbeatable? What if I was too late?

"I'll take one of everything," I said as I started plucking bottles and packets off the shelf. I knew nothing about any of them, but one of them had to work. It didn't matter what it cost; I needed Emmett to get better.

I needed Emmett.

"Are you sure? That's quite a—"

I dropped my haul on the counter along with a bag of coins. His eyes were drawn to the coin bag like a raven to sparkle. He met my gaze, searching for permission to accept such a hefty payment.

"All of it," I repeated, my tone as firm as steel.

Nigel nodded and went to work packaging the supplies in a neat bundle of red paper with a silver bow. He picked up the bag of coins I'd offered him, dumped out half, and gave the bag back to me, keeping far fewer than I'd expected.

"Is that enough?" I asked.

"For Emmett, it's plenty," he said with a touching smile. "I can't run this shop by myself forever. Tell him his boss needs him back at it. He lives in the cottage at the edge of town by the juniper grove." He slid the package toward me with a wink, then added a pack of my usual seeds on top, and I tucked it under my arm with the wrapped package of gloves.

“Thank you, I will.” I waved at him, then darted back out the door, fighting the icy wind as I raced toward the edge of town.

I had never been to Emmett’s home before, but unlike Alfie, I knew he at least had one. I raced down the road, only slowing to tiptoe over patches of ice and slippery slush. The hem of my cloak was soaked from the snow, and my ears were stinging even with my hood up. It didn’t take me long to find the juniper grove, but it took a little time to spot the tiny cottage, no bigger than my bedroom, positioned by the edge of the trees.

It looked terrible. The walls were half-rotted and dead moss was creeping between the log walls. The door was crooked, with the top half open to the elements and likely letting in bursts of cold air. The thatched roof appeared to be sinking under the weight of the snow, and whatever was left of the window was covered by cracked shutters.

*Please be all right, Emmett...*

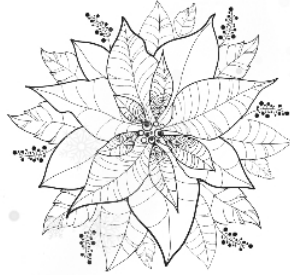
I made my way to the front door and knocked twice, nearly swinging the loose door open from the pressure alone. I waited a few seconds, then couldn’t hold back any longer. I pushed the door open with ease and burst inside, my eyes desperately scanning the tiny room.

“Emmett?” I caught sight of a wooden-framed bed in the corner covered in a pile of handmade quilts. I looked at the bed’s headboard, spotting only a head peeking out from the mountain of blankets. Emmett’s eyes were closed, his mouth open, and his breath raspy. “Emmett!”

I rushed to his side, dropping to my knees as I pulled back a few of the quilts to get a better look at his face. My chest seized like I had been punched in the ribs, panic flooding my veins as I looked at the red splotches covering his pale face.

*The same ones Mother had.*

## Chapter Eighteen



“Emmett...can you hear me?” I pulled my mitten off with my teeth and reached a shaking hand to his forehead. It was blazing hot.

I debated pulling off some of the quilts but then realized how frightfully cold it was in the little cottage. Even if he was hot, I couldn’t expose him to this. I looked around the room and spotted a tiny clay fireplace opposite his bed. There was a neat stack of dry wood next to it, but the burnt-down ashes in the hearth made it clear that it hadn’t been lit in at least a day.

Without wasting a second more, I loaded the wood into the hearth and sparked a fire with a pair of stones. I ripped Nigel’s paper packaging off the purchased medicines and tossed it into the fire to get it roaring. I then grabbed the best-looking medication and hurried back to Emmett.

The cottage began warming up, but Emmett’s eyes were still sealed closed, and his breathing grew more labored by the minute. I popped the cork off the medicine I’d chosen. I scanned my eyes over the label, reading that the entire bottle was safe for full grown males.

I pulled back the quilts, and a rush of heat flushed my veins when I realized Emmett was shirtless. A glossy layer of sweat coated his defined chest, making it difficult to focus on his face as I propped up his head with my arm. Fighting off the shyness that came from noticing Emmett’s impressive physique, I managed to tilt his head up enough that I could safely dribble the elixir in his mouth.

Each drop felt too precious to lose as a few slid down the sides of his cracked lips. I gently rubbed his throat between doses, ensuring he was swallowing everything before giving him more. Once the bottle was empty, I gently laid him back down, tucking only two quilts up to his chin now that the fire was heating the space.

“Come on, Emmett,” I whispered, my voice hoarse as I found myself brushing the hair from his forehead. My heart felt like it was going to crack into two every time I looked at those horrid red splotches. “Please wake up.”

*He has to wake up. He has to get better. He has to know that I’m sorry for all the things I did to him.*

“If you wake up, I’ll never make fun of you again,” I promised. “I’ll tell everyone you’re the most gifted baker in the village. Or that you’re too incredible to need a magical gift, which is why you were born without one. I’ll tell them anything. I’ll tell *you* anything.”

My hand lingered on his cheek, and a thick tear escaped my eyes as my gaze lingered on his pale lips. The heat pulsing through our touch was more than just his fever. I burned for this man. I’d burned with rage when he taunted me as a child. I’d burned with envy when he succeeded where I couldn’t. I’d burned with joy when he held my hand and drank cider with me. Now, the fear that burned in me was all-consuming, and the pain of not knowing whether or not I’d see his eyes again was just as crushing as when Mother stepped out the door for the last time.

My heart was on fire for Emmett, and no amount of snow or ice could ease the burn he would leave behind. I burned for him...even more so than I’d realized. It had hurt to see Alfie walk out the door, but not because I needed to feel close to him. I thought that deep down, I’d only wanted to know what it felt like to be close to someone who didn’t set me ablaze, because the man I already desired was one I was afraid to accept.

“Wake up, Emmett,” I whispered so softly it was barely a breath. “And I’ll tell you *everything*.”

*I’ll tell you that I want to give you so much more than my gifts can offer.*

I watched with bated breath for his eyes to open, but they never did. My heart crumbled beneath me, and the tears blurred my vision once more. There had to be something else I could try. Another herb, another tea, something!

I went back to the pile of remedies I’d purchased and started searching through the labels and ingredients for anything that said *miracle*. I needed another miracle. Was it selfish to ask for so many? My head was too fuzzy to think straight. I had to cure him. Emmett couldn’t die like Mother had when I was right here to save him.

“E-Evalie?”

Emmett’s croaking voice was sweeter than the purest nightingale’s song. I snapped around, my curls springing out from all angles as I met the bleary eyes of my worst rival and best friend.

“Emmett!” I practically leaped to his bedside, tears pouring down my cheeks as I clasped a hand over my mouth. “Oh, thank goodness! I thought you’d never wake up. I saw your splotches and felt your fever, and the room was so cold—”

“Hey, hey...” Emmett sat up with a groan. Why was he sitting up so quickly? He reached out to pull my hand from my face and gripped it as tightly as he could in his weakened state. The blankets fell off his torso, revealing his exposed chest that would have made me blush if I weren’t so relieved to see it rising and falling with ease. “It’s all right. I’m all right. I’m sorry I scared you. I was sleeping pretty hard and didn’t hear you come in.”

Was he...was he trying to soothe *me*?

“W-what are you doing? You need to lie down.” I tried to pull my hand free so he could relax, but he didn’t loosen his grip. His warm touch melted me, fluttering my heart and settling it at the same time.

“I’ll rest when I know you’re okay.” His voice was still raspy, but the rawness wasn’t from his illness; it was because he was dead set on comforting me. “I know how scary I must look to you right now, after...after everything. I tried to avoid

letting you see me like this as soon as I got sick because I knew—" He started coughing, and I held my breath until he caught his. "I'm going to be all right." He cleared his throat with a determined gasp. "I promise. Please don't be scared."

*Don't be scared? How could I not be when he's suffering and I'm useless?*

"But your face and your fever..." My breathing quickened as I noticed how clammy his palms still were. "You look so much like she did. What if you don't get better? What if it all happens again? What if—"

"Look at me, Evalie." He moved my hand, pressing it to his warm chest right over his heart. My blood raced like it was fighting to escape, my skin electrifying as I felt his heartbeat, steady and smooth. "Feel me. Feel that I'm all right and that I'm going to get better."

He sounded so sincere. It was as if he knew exactly what fears tormented me and how to remedy them. *Probably because he experienced the same losses and torment I did...* It was almost too much. I should have been the one comforting him right now, not the other way around. He was sick, left cold and alone in a home that was barely standing, yet he was worried about *me*.

"You...you're doing it again." My breath hooked, my eyes latched to where he gripped my hand.

"Doing what?" He stared at me so intently, like I was the only remedy he had ever needed.

"You're looking out for me when I don't deserve it. Why would you care about how I feel when you're lying in bed sick from an illness you likely caught when I took you out into town?"

"Who said you don't deserve it?" Emmett asked, his hands brushing against mine and rolling goosebumps up my arm.

"I-I..." No words came to mind. No one had ever told me I was undeserving, so why did it feel so true? It was just like Alfie. No matter how much I professed his worth to me, he never believed it. It was crushing for me to witness Alfie deny himself good things, yet he was only mirroring what I was doing to Emmett. "I guess...I never felt like enough on my own. Mother's gift always enhanced mine. I was never special enough on my own. You were the only person I felt superior to, but even so, you constantly proved how easily you could *give* without being *given to*. I've never known how to do that. It's infuriating, and it makes me hate you sometimes, but you don't deserve that either. I shouldn't be receiving if I can't give. Even now, I brought you all this medicine, and I still don't know if I'm doing the right thing."

I squeezed my eyes shut, grief tumbling over me as I mourned the side of me that had died with my mother. She had made up a piece of me, and now that I was on my own, I had been relying on Alfie's magic and Emmett's kindness too much to know if I could ever be whole on my own.

"Giving isn't payment for kindness," Emmett said softly. "Magical gifts can be sold, traded, and utilized in ways that we couldn't have imagined accomplishing on our own, but the act of giving isn't the same. Your magic is incredible, but your desire to visit me and see if I'm well is more valuable to me than any enchanted herb or vial. If taking me out into town was what caused this illness, then I'd fight it off every time so I can do it all over again."

"You don't mean that," I said with misty eyes.

“Are you calling me a liar?” He smirked, dropping my hand. My spirits lifted as I saw a glimpse of his normal self shine through the illness.

“I’m calling you delusional.” I raised a hand to his forehead. His fever had faded a bit with the medicine, but he was still warm. “This fever is making you say crazy things.”

“Then I’ll keep saying them.” His voice dropped, and he cupped his hand over mine, gently moving it from his forehead to his cheek. “I’ll fight this illness and tell you every day that you’re worth so much more than your gift. Take it from a man without magic. The greatest joy comes from things that will always be real.”

“Is magic not real to you?” I asked, my heartbeat pounding all the way up in my palm as he leaned closer, shrinking the distance between us.

“There’s a lot that seems more real than it truly is,” he said in an airy voice. “But this magic, right here...” He brushed a hand through my hair, his fingers tangling in my curls as his eyes traced my features. “This feels real.”

He was right. It felt real. I had told Alfie the same thing, but I was merely *telling* him. This time, I felt it. I was so much like Alfie, which was likely why we connected so perfectly, but two identical puzzle pieces didn’t fit together. The ones that opposed each other did.

“I’m sorry.” Emmett pulled back, leaving me once again longing for a touch that never came. “I should be keeping my distance. I don’t want you to get sick.”

*Is that why he pulled away?*

“I won’t,” I said with a soft smile. “I had red fever as a child, remember? I’m immune now.”

“That’s right.” A relieved smile spanned his face. “Your red spots stuck around for an entire week.”

“And you took great pleasure in calling me *splotch face*.”

“Then you’d threaten to kiss me and spread your germs if I didn’t stop.” He gave me a coy smile, and I felt my face flush as red as his spots. “I’d threaten the same now that I have a chance at revenge, but clearly, it wouldn’t be effective.”

My heart pounded as I suddenly imagined all the ways it *would* be effective. Just hearing him tease me again was enough to relieve all the fears I’d bottled up over the last few days.

“I’m not happy that you’re sick, but I’m a little glad to know that you weren’t avoiding me after I introduced you to Alfie,” I admitted as I smoothed my hands over my skirt.

“Why would I avoid you?”

“I don’t know, it was a silly thought.” I shrugged. “He just seemed to bother you.”

“Bother me? Like I was jealous?”

“What? No, I mean...”

“Don’t worry,” he laughed. “I’m not jealous of that guy, except maybe of how happy he makes you.”

“You make me happy, too,” I said with another thud in my chest. “I may not have always known it, but even when you drive me mad, there’s a reason I keep coming back. Alfie is a good friend, but I appreciate you looking out for me when I brought him up.”

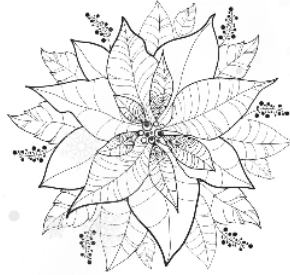
Emmett's smile shifted, and the room felt a bit colder despite the warm fire. "That reminds me." He shifted in his bed, reaching over to grab a clean shirt. "Before I got sick, something wasn't sitting right with me about your business, and I was hoping to investigate it."

"Investigate?" I rose to my feet, preparing to steady Emmett as he started working his way out of bed. He was already looking better. Maybe that remedy really had worked. "What are you talking about? I already told you that Alfie and his magic are harmless."

"And I believe you," he said, meeting my eyes with a steely look that unsettled me more than any fever could. "But there's no way Alfie is creating those flowers."



## Chapter Nineteen



“What do you mean?” I blinked at him. “Of course they were created by Alfie. He’s been doing it for weeks.”

Emmett buttoned up his shirt, his skin still pale but his color slowly improving by the minute. He should still be lying in bed in his state, even after taking the remedy, but the determination in his movements made it clear that he was through resting. He grabbed his boots and started stuffing them on, not slowing down despite the fact that he’d been in bed for at least a full day.

“Have you ever *seen* him grow the flowers?” Emmett asked, barely looking up from his bootlaces.

“Of course, I...” My voice trailed off as I recalled the moments he had used his magic. I’d seen him use his gifts, but the flowers always grew when I was asleep. “He’s used his magic in front of me before.”

“You saw the flowers bloom?”

“Well, no, I—”

“I knew it.” He grabbed his coat off of a peg on the wall, his expression twisted with a frightening intensity. “The flowers aren’t coming from Alfie.”

“That seems like quite the jump in logic.” I crossed my arms. “If the flowers aren’t from Alfie, then where do you propose they’re coming from?”

He froze, his hands going stiff around the buttons on his coat. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“That’s what we need to find out.”

“But we already know they’re from Alfie.”

“Trust me, Evalie. They’re not.” Emmett’s voice was firm and rooted.

*What is he talking about?*

“I don’t understand... Do you know something about Alfie that I don’t?” I searched his eyes, finding an obvious answer that I was hardly prepared for. “You do, don’t you? Have you two met before?”

“No, that’s not it.” Emmett sighed as he ran a hand through his hair. “It’s just—he’s only... Tell me, do you still care about him? Is he important to you?”

He placed his hands on my shoulders, his touch gentle but urgent. He'd said he wasn't jealous, and it didn't feel like he was, but I couldn't understand why my attachment to Alfie would even matter in that moment.

"Yes," I answered honestly. "He means a lot to me. I trust him, just like I trust you."

Emmett gave me a smile that was both earnest and sad. "Then keep caring about him. I don't want to ruin your image of him unless it needs to be done."

"How could you ruin it?" I asked, my stomach knotting as I watched him bite the edge of his lip. "Has Alfie done something?"

He released my shoulders, his smile still gripping me as he finished buttoning up his coat. "From what I've seen, all he's done is care for you and make you smile. Anything else you need to know, he can tell you himself when he's ready."

A thousand questions hammered in my mind, each more troubling than the last. Was Alfie hiding something from me?

"But first, we need to find out where your flowers are coming from," Emmett continued. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to watch your house tonight and see if anyone comes by."

"Alfie will come by."

"That's fine. I'm just not certain he'll be the only one."

"Who else would—"

*Wait a minute. The footsteps I heard after Alfie left last night. Was that not him?*

"Evalie?" Emmett must have seen the blood drain from my face. It had never even crossed my mind that anyone other than Alfie would ever break in, but that still left a lot of questions about who and why. "Did you think of something?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted, though the sour feeling in my stomach was enough to convince me that something was very wrong. "I heard footsteps last night, but I thought it was Alfie coming back. That would make sense, wouldn't it?"

"Does it make sense to you?" Emmett asked.

*No, it doesn't. He didn't seem eager to return when he left.*

Emmett read my silence, then grabbed a scarf to twist around his neck. "Very well. I'll wait outside tonight and keep an eye on the entryways to see if anyone other than Alfie comes in."

*Outside?* "Hold on, you can't stand out in the cold. You're still sick." I looked at the beads of sweat still clinging to his brow and the red splotches that didn't appear to be fading anytime soon. "You'll wait inside with me."

"Inside? Evalie, I might be there all night."

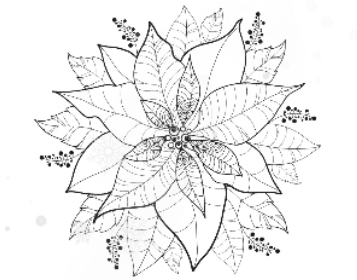
"All the better for me to keep an eye on you and that fever," I said firmly, earning a small laugh.

"You want me in your sights, hm?" he asked.

"I want you *well*," I clarified, ignoring the rippling sensation across my neck.

"Trust me, Evalie," he said as he opened the door, letting in a gust of frosty air that immediately blew out the fire. "If you're nearby, I'll always be well."

## Chapter Twenty



I forced Emmett to lie down the moment we returned to the shop. He tried to argue, saying he was fine and would rather keep watch, but after I promised to wake him up at sundown, he agreed.

I fiddled with the wrapped gloves I had been waiting to give him, wondering if I should do it now or wait until the Day of Giving when he hopefully felt better. Alfie's shoes were still sitting on the table, the magic already fading and the colors dulling. I wondered what secrets Alfie had been keeping from me and if he'd even tell me about them when he arrived.

When night started to fall, I woke Emmett just like I'd promised. He was a little groggy, but his color looked almost perfect, aside from the lingering red spots. Peace and joy filled my soul as I watched him crawl out of the bed with ease. He was right. He was going to get better.

"Let's hide in your storage pantry," Emmett suggested as we returned to the main room.

"The pantry?" I asked. "But what if Alfie shows up and can't find us?"

"Truthfully, I'm not even sure he'll make an appearance tonight," Emmett said as he creaked open the closet door and removed a few old brooms.

"That's odd to think, considering he visits every night."

"I could be wrong. I don't know him as well as you do," Emmett admitted. "Though I'm guessing he often shows up early in the night, so we'll know soon."

"How would you know that?"

"Because whoever is creating the flowers would have to come after you've fallen asleep, long past midnight."

He was right; Alfie came early. I hated that it made sense. The sounds I'd heard, the footsteps, creaking doors, and echoes always came closer to the morning...

*If the flowers weren't from Alfie, why would he lie?*

Emmett nestled himself into a spot on the pantry floor, scooching over an old clay pot that still had some dried-out soil. I followed him inside and settled on a patch of floor next to the pot, using an old potato sack as a cushion. Dust lingered in

the small space, and I had to keep rubbing my nose so I wouldn't sneeze all over Emmett. He kept the door slightly cracked, giving us a tiny sliver of light and a slender window to look out of.

Nerves jittered through me like a child playing hide-and-seek. I curled my knees up to my chest, my eyes focused on the tiny opening in the door that gave me a perfect glimpse of Alfie's boots. An uneasy churning shifted in my gut.

Someone had been lying to me, and tonight, I was going to find out the depths of it. I just wasn't sure I was ready for what I would see.

"Evalie." Emmett whispered my name like an elegant spell, charming me to look away from the shoes and meet his deep-green gaze. "Whatever happens, I'm always here for you."

He reached out for my fingers, gently brushing them for permission before I flipped over my palm so he could take my hand. I cherished his touch. It wasn't asking for anything other than if it could give me strength when I needed it most.

And considering what Emmett was anticipating to unfold, it sounded like I needed all the strength I could get.

The night passed one hour after the other until midnight came and went, with no Alfie in sight. Something definitely felt off now. Why wasn't he here?

"I don't like this," I said as I felt my fingers go cold around Emmett's.

"Neither do I," Emmett said. He'd shifted so close to me in the tight space that I could feel his breath on my neck while we both peered out the cracked door. "Someone should have been here by now. Evalie, did you plant any seeds today?"

The seeds! I'd completely forgotten. They must have still been at Emmett's house with all the remedies.

"No, actually, I left them at your house. Do you think that's why no one has come?" A frustrated yawn crept over me. Had we waited up all night for nothing?

"It could be...but maybe—"

The front door creaked, and we both went silent. Someone was walking inside. The slow clunk of heavy boots on the floor made me jump with each echo. I'd heard those same steps before—almost every night, either as I fell asleep or woke up. I'd always assumed it was from a dream or from Alfie.

*Has it not been Alfie?*

An unfamiliar figure stepped into our line of sight from the closet, and I felt my heart stop. I could only see them from behind. They wore a dark cloak, a mask that came up to a shadowed pair of eyes, and heavy black boots. Alfie never wore boots.

"Look," Emmett whispered, but I barely heard his voice over the pulsing in my skull.

The intruder was carrying something. They shifted their cloak, revealing an armful of three flowerpots identical to mine, each with a brilliant red flower sprouting from within.

*The flowers...they're not from Alfie, after all.*

"He's switching them out." Emmett's hand left mine as he leaned closer to better view the flower-bearing intruder. "What is he doing?"

*I don't know. I never knew. All this time, I'd been gifted nothing but lies.*

I felt like I was going to either pass out or scream. I trusted Emmett, but I didn't want to believe his theories were true because if Emmett was right, then Alfie was a liar. Why would he tell me the flowers came from him? Did he know something else was going on? Did he even care?

*I need answers.*

I stood up. Emmett reached out to try and stop me, but his words were lost in the white noise scrambling around my head. I'd been played for a fool, and I was going to find out why, and how Alfie played into all of it.

I threw the closet door open and it smacked against the wall, causing the intruder to jump so hard that he dropped the pots, which shattered. Dirt spilled out across the floor and the red blooms flopped hopelessly to the ground.

"Who are you?" I asked in a commanding voice that nearly rattled the rafters. The intruder went still, their eyes wild with panic as they met mine for a petrifying moment. *Why were they so familiar?* "Where's Alfie?"

The shock wore off of the intruder, and they suddenly bolted for the door. I raced to stop them, but Emmett was faster. He threw himself in front of the exit, and I went straight for the scrambling invader. They tried to turn around and run in a different direction, but I wasn't letting them escape. I threw my weight at their legs, tackling them to the ground and causing them to roll into the spilled dirt next to the fallen flowers.

Before they could get their bearings, I made a mad grab for their mask, tearing it straight off and revealing a face I would have never expected to find.

"N-Nigel?" I gaped. All the air left my body as I stared at the scrawny shopkeeper half-smothered in dirt.

Nigel spat a clump of soil out of his mouth, then rubbed his eyes only to pop them open in front of one of the bright flowers on the floor next to him. When he saw the bloom, he jumped away, taking in a sharp breath that he appeared to hold.

"Give me that mask!" Nigel demanded, his tone icy and fierce like a chilled blade. "Now!"

He lunged at me for the mask, but Emmett was once again quick to step up. He jumped in front of me, snatching Nigel by the hand with an impossibly strong grip for someone who should still be sick in bed. Nigel wailed as Emmett gave his wrist a slight twist, forcing him to cower back onto the floor.

"What in the kingdoms do you think you're doing here?" Emmett asked in a voice laced with enough fire to melt a jewel. "Why are you bringing flowers into Evalie's house?"

I'd never seen Emmett so worked up before. Betrayal saturated his face as he glared down at the man who had helped him keep a roof over his head for years. That same man was sneaking into the home of someone he cared for.

"Let me go, boy!" Nigel hissed as he tried to twist free, but Emmett didn't budge. "I'm only here on business. And give me back that mask before—" His mouth snapped shut, and my focus shifted to the mask in my palm.

I took a closer look at it. It wasn't just a strip of cloth designed to conceal someone's identity. It was layered with thick cotton and two strips of fabric. It was the same mask my father had worn when he worked in the coal mines to keep from breathing in the dust.

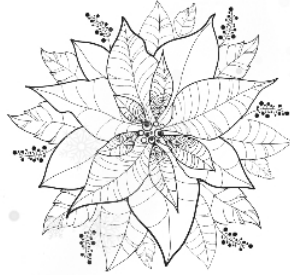
“What do you need a mask for?” Emmett asked. “We’ve seen your face. Now you'd better start explaining what you’re doing with these flowers!”

I looked down at the fallen flower only inches from Nigel’s face. Panic slowly blanched his skin, making it as white as snow. The flowers had such vibrant petals...vibrant *red* petals. Like the splotches on Emmett’s skin.

*No...*

“I think I have an idea of what he’s doing,” I said as I held up the mask's interior for Emmett to see. “He’s poisoning the village, and he’s using my shop to do it.”

## Chapter Twenty-One



“The flowers are poisoned?” Emmett took a closer look at the bloom's center, narrowing his eyes on what appeared to be tiny specks of red dust scattered around the center. “But how...? Why?”

I grabbed a broom and held up the end of it to Nigel like a weapon. “Start talking.”

“Not until you give me that blasted mask!” The shopkeeper tried to struggle free from Emmett, desperate to escape the poisonous flower. Emmett showed no mercy, twisting his arm behind his back and yanking him to his feet. He slammed Nigel against the wall, pinning him in place with the same muscles he had strengthened in his shop.

“*Talk*,” Emmett repeated, no longer bothering to ask politely. “What did you do to the flowers?”

Nigel tried to squirm again, but it was no use against the full force of Emmett’s anger.

“All right, all right! Just loosen up a bit!” Nigel growled. “I used my gift to package up a sample of red fever into a tangible form, then spread it on the flowers.”

*Packaging a fever? Could his gift even do such a thing?*

Sure enough, the tiny specks of red on the blooms had the slightest shimmer of magic when looked at in the firelight. He’d been gifting everyone with disease.

*And I’d been distributing it.*

“Are you mad!?” I asked, my stomach tightening as I realized the awful role I’d been playing in the village’s wide-spread illness. “Red fever can be lethal!”

How long had he been spreading the disease? Had it really been him all along?

“It’s not lethal if you can afford a remedy,” Nigel said with a sick chuckle that dulled the color in his eyes. “Look at you, Emmett! You’re looking better already. Which cure did the trick for you? Was it the tea? Perhaps an elixir?”

Emmett snatched him by the collar of his shirt, lifting him off the ground and partially choking him. “You’re poisoning people to *profit* off them?” Emmett’s

voice was pure ice. “Is that why you ordered so many of those remedies? You’ve been endangering lives to make an extra coin!”

I pressed a hand to my lips; my fingers were shivering with a rage I could barely see through. My flowers...the flowers I had cherished so dearly for saving my life and believed Alfie’s magic gifted them. They were hurting people. Every person who came close to the flowers was getting sick...except me.

*Because I was immune.*

“You sold me the seeds every day...” I thought out loud. “So you always knew how many I purchased and how many blooms would need to be brought in. You also knew if I was ever out of the shop, like when I went out with Emmett and the flowers appeared earlier in the day. All this time, you’ve been selling me flowers only to bring yourself more business. And after all those kind things you told me. How despicable can you be?”

“*Despicable?*” Nigel snorted, his breath short with Emmett’s tight grip. “Sorry to break it to you, darling, but you’re no better than me. That coin pouch you brought me yesterday sure was hefty. Don’t pretend that you haven’t benefited from this arrangement as well. Sure, you weren’t aware of *all* the details, but you got a pretty good end of the deal. Get mad all you want, but you’re living comfortably thanks to my plans, and no one really got hurt.”

“Except for everyone you *poisoned*,” Emmett reminded him. “Not everyone can afford medicine!”

“The rich folks who can afford holiday flowers sure can,” Nigel sputtered, and Emmett loosened him just enough to take another full breath. “It would be one thing if I poisoned bread or water, but who buys flowers except those that can afford it?”

I wanted to shove Emmett aside and strangle him myself. Was that what he told himself so he could sleep at night overtop his giant hoard of coins?

Emmett pulled the scarf off from his neck and bound Nigel’s wrists behind him, then tied the scarf around the leg of the heavy oak table. He kept a tight hand on Nigel’s shoulder, threatening to inch it back to his neck if needed.

“People smell flowers even if they weren’t the ones who bought them. Emmett never bought a flower, and all the children who have been turning up sick weren’t ever in my shop.” I was fuming now, my anger blazing as I thought back to the quiet streets during the most wholesome time of year. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? What you’ve made *me* do?”

*Did he make someone else do things, too?*

My heart stopped as I looked back at the fallen flower. The poison had come from Nigel’s magic, but where had the *flower* come from? I doubted Nigel had a greenhouse full of flowers hidden behind his house. He had to have acquired them from somewhere else—or *someone* else.

“Where’s Alfie?” I took a step forward. My voice filled with warning as I glared daggers at the shopkeeper I had once trusted. “Did you involve him in this, too?”

“What?” Nigel narrowed his eyes at me as he fought the urge to struggle, again treating me like a fool.

“Alfie!” I shouted, kicking at the red petals and scattering them in the air. “The man who grew these flowers! Where is he? What did you do to him?”



Why hadn't he come tonight? What was Nigel playing at?

"Evalie..." Emmett released Nigel, his focus shifting to me with a voice that was too calm to reach me.

"What are you talking about?" Nigel asked. "I don't know anyone named Alfie!"

"You're lying!" I ran at him, but Emmett caught me by the arm with a firm hold. My magic swelled in my veins, itching to fight even though it had no physical properties. "You didn't grow these flowers on your own! Where's the man who created them?"

"It wasn't a man!" Nigel shouted back.

*What?*

"It wasn't me, Evalie."

Alfie's voice carried through the room like the wrong note on a beautiful flute. I whipped around to see him. My heart was both leaping and crumbling as I took in the horrified look on his face. He looked riddled with guilt, though I had no idea what for. The door was already shut behind him, and his damp socks were almost sealed to the floor. How long had he been standing there?

"A-Alfie?" Tears welled up in my eyes. I was so confused. Why was he here now? What was going on?

Emmett released me as soon as I uttered Alfie's name, his expression hard to place as he let me approach the man who had lied to me for weeks.

"Hello, Evalie," Alfie said with a pained smile. "Sorry for not coming sooner."

"What's happening, Alfie?" I asked, taking slow steps toward him, my gaze locked on his chestnut eyes. "Did you know about any of this?"

He looked behind me, presumably at the flowers and the silent shopkeeper, then released a weighted sigh. "Would you believe me if I said that I didn't?"

*Would I?*

"I trusted you..." My mouth went dry. "I invited you into my home. Why would you tell me you were growing the flowers if you never did?"

Alfie didn't reply, his attention shifting to his frosty hands as he quietly rubbed them together. "I..."

"*Why*, Alfie?" I repeated.

"I only ever wanted to make you happy..."

"Happy?" I said. "By lying to me?"

"What's the matter with her?" Nigel huffed from behind. "She sounds like she's—"

"Quiet!" Emmett smacked Nigel's mask over his face, and despite the aggressive maneuver, Nigel eagerly accepted it over his mouth.

"What?" I looked from Nigel to Emmett, sensing a range of unspoken thoughts that were all part of the puzzle I wasn't seeing. "What do I sound like? Crazy? I certainly feel that way. Everyone seems to know something I don't."

"I promise you," Alfie said. "I only know as much as you do."

*But I know nothing. Other than Nigel being a crook.*

“This doesn’t make sense.” I dragged my fingers through my hair, pulling at the strands. “If you don’t know anything else, where did the flowers come from? What aren’t you telling me, Alfie? I know you have some sort of secret!”

“Evalie...” Emmett crept up behind me and put a tender hand on my shoulder. I jumped but didn’t pull back out of fear of collapsing or combusting from all this aggravation. “There’s... There’s something you need to know about Alfie.”

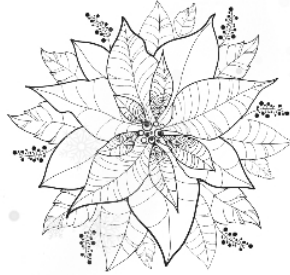
I shifted to face Emmett while still seeing Alfie in the background; both men shared the same solemn look loaded with what looked like pity more than anything else.

“Then tell me,” I practically pleaded, sensing Alfie tense even from across the room. “Tell me what I’m missing, please.”

Alfie didn’t say a word, but Emmett was through being quiet. He tightened his hand on my shoulder, bracing me like he was prepared to scoop me off the floor.

“Alfie... isn’t real,” Emmett said. “You’re the only one who can perceive him.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two



“What?”

This was a joke. Why would Emmet lie to me like that?

“That’s...that’s ridiculous,” I said. “Of course Alfie is real. He’s standing right here.”

Alfie didn’t say a word, his body as stiff as a tin soldier. Why wasn’t he saying anything? Why was everyone acting so strange?

Blood rushed up to my ears as my heart started pattering like I was on the verge of fainting. I didn’t actually believe this, did I? I’d known Alfie for weeks. He was as real as I was.

“We can’t see him,” Emmett said gently as he withdrew his hand from me. “We never have.”

*What...?*

“That’s not possible...” I backed away from Emmett, my heart rate growing even more frantic. “You met him in the town. I introduced you both, and you—”

*Never spoke to him.*

No... This wasn’t true. I was looking at Alfie, and he was right there.

“S-stop it, you guys.” I staggered forward, my eyes locked on Alfie’s broken smile. I stopped in front of him and looked down at his frosty hands, which I’d longed to touch. “He’s real...he’s right here. Look, I can touch him—”

My hand passed straight through him.

“Wha—” I sucked in a breath that nearly burst my lungs. The room felt like it was spinning. This was a dream. This had to be a dream. Alfie was real.

*Except that he’s not...*

“I’m sorry,” Alfie said, and I clung to every note in his voice, reminding myself that I could hear him and he was here. “I wanted to tell you, but I knew it would hurt you more than I could bear. The truth is, I’m a creation of your own magic. You wished for comfort, and your gift made that wish into a vivid illusion that only you can see and hear.”

I looked down at my palms, my breath short as I noticed the subconscious buzzing of my magic beneath my skin. It couldn't be true. This had to be another lie. Yet...every time Alfie appeared, it had been right after my magic was active.

*I created Alfie.*

"No...no, no, no!" I curled my hands into fists and pounded them against my forehead. "No! You're real! You've been real since I first saw you at the funeral. You can't be made of magic. That's not even possible!"

"Evalie." Emmett stepped up beside me, his voice tender and quiet as he silently pointed to the window. "Look outside. He's never left any footprints in the snow."

*Huh? That can't possibly be true.*

I stumbled past Alfie and tossed open the giant green door, letting in a burst of icy wind. A spark of hope ignited inside me as I looked down at the fresh prints that were most definitely in the snow. Alfie couldn't have left prints if he wasn't real.

"Stop messing with me. His prints are right here!" I pointed at the snow with a twitching smile, but no one smiled with me.

"Those are Nigel's prints," Emmett said. "They've always been Nigel's prints. They perfectly match his boots."

My heart sank again as I looked back at the heavy black boots Nigel had stamped through my house. Realization hit me like a brick to the forehead as I turned my gaze to Alfie's uncovered feet, feet that *never* would have left boot prints.

*They were the wrong footprints all along, and I never even noticed.*

I crumbled to the floor, my eyes going blind as I stared at the endless sea of white snow that had been trying to tell me the truth since the beginning. There had never been a shoeless man treading through the snow to get to my home. There had never been a man at all.

"I'm sorry, Evalie. I'm so sorry." Emmett joined me on the floor, staring out the door with me as he gingerly took my hand. "I wanted to tell you, but I could see how much he meant to you. Grief is more powerful than anyone realizes until they experience it, and your magic grieved your mother with you by creating a friend to heal your heart. I wasn't going to steal that joy from you when you needed it most."

It explained everything. It explained why Emmett was so strange when he met Alfie, why Alfie never let me touch him, and why he had so much in common with me from the start. Alfie *was* me, or at least my unconscious creation. Even his so-called magic mirrored the gift I grieved from my mother.

*It's true, then... He never knew more than I did.*

Alfie sank down on the other side of me, and I could still pick up the scent of cinnamon and pine that my mind had crafted for him. The two men looked out into the snow on either side of me, both holding a heavy piece of my heart that I couldn't lift on my own.

I turned to look at Alfie, *really* look at him. He was perfect. Nothing about him seemed fake or forged, yet I knew that I would only make contact with the wind if I reached out to touch him. Alfie met my eyes with a smile that was too sweet for me to process.

"You're not real," I whispered, a tear streaming down my cheek as I reached for his hand but kept it inches away from making contact.

“I’m real to you.” Alfie hovered his hand above mine, and I could almost swear that I felt heat radiating off his skin. “I’m a real gift that you gave yourself. I’m sorry I was dishonest with you. I wasn’t trying to fool you. My only hope was to make you smile and fulfill your wish to feel joy and comfort again. I may not have magic or a gift, but I spent every day trying to make you feel whole again.”

That was why he’d always held a piece of me. He was a reflection of the joy I once knew and could someday have again. He didn’t just hold a piece of me; he *was* a piece of me. One so deep and personal that only I could perceive it.

I moved my hand to touch his. I knew it wouldn’t make contact, but I had to try one more time. As expected, my hand phased right through his, but then his image started to flicker.

“Wh-what’s happening?” I reached for his cheek, wishing I could pull him close but still failing to make any contact. “Why are you fading? Where are you going?”

“Your gift is wearing off,” Alfie said with a sad smile. “You enchanted your grief into something more beautiful, but your grieving heart has begun to heal. Now that you’re aware of the illusion, reality is becoming clearer.”

*Reality? But I don’t want a reality without Alfie.*

“I’ll bring you back!” I said as I clawed at his image, fighting to grasp anything other than air. “I’ll use my gift again and bring you back to me. You don’t have to go.”

“Evalie.” He placed his hand on my cheek, actually *placed* it. I couldn’t feel him. He had no warmth, chill, or even pressure from his skin, but I knew he was holding me. I could sense his soothing touch even without it being real. “Look around. You don’t need me. You have so much to be grateful for and people who love you more than a magical gift ever could. Take the joy I’ve gifted you with, and cherish it. Make this a Day of Giving like no other.”

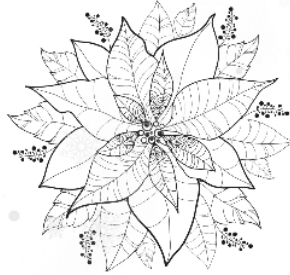
He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my forehead, sending a real spark through my skin. My heart jumped and shattered all in one blow, and when he leaned back to look at me one final time, his image became clear.

“Alfie...” Emmett breathed behind me. “I see him.”

“Take care of her for me,” Alfie said to Emmett, his dark eyes sparkling one final time before fading away like snow melting into spring. “Goodbye, Evalie. Always give others the joy you gave me.”

Then he was gone.

## Chapter Twenty-Three



The air was still, and only the sound of Emmett's breathing permeated the quiet. I didn't move for a long moment, allowing the chilly air to sink into my bones as I let everything process. Alfie was gone, but in truth, he had never really been here.

I turned to face Emmett, tears clustering in the corners of my eyes but not bothering to fall. Emmett held out his arms to me, and I immediately fell into them. I couldn't cry, but I still melted into his embrace as he rubbed my back while I caught my breath. The tears were there, but I couldn't cry. Alfie wanted me to be joyful. I couldn't start crying now.

"Are you all right?" Emmett whispered in my ear.

"Not yet," I admitted, "but I will be." It was all too fresh to process, but I needed to hold someone real right now. "Thank you, Emmett."

"Thank you?" Emmett breathed. "I pulled you away from someone you care about. That hardly seems like it deserves gratitude."

I buried my face into his chest and shook my head. "You didn't pull me away. You've been pulling me closer all along." I dug my fingers into the fabric of his coat, soaking in his warmth and the realness of his touch. "Everything you did was to protect me and my heart. You knew from the start that Alfie wasn't real, but you didn't break the illusion of my gift when you saw how happy it made me."

"But I broke it today," he said remorsefully. "Alfie is gone because of me."

My heart jerked at the hard truth. He was right—Alfie was gone, and even though he was never real, the sense of loss was still there. But at the same time, it didn't carry the same kind of sting as my typical grief. Losing Alfie meant gaining back the part of me he'd carried.

I lifted my chin to meet Emmett's gaze, and I could hear his heart pounding in response to my smile.

Alfie was gone, but I had so much left.

"You were doing the same thing as Alfie. You were putting my happiness first. How could I ever be anything but grateful for that?" I asked, then watched as the spark relit in Emmett's eyes.

“Speaking of happiness,” Nigel called out from the back of the room, reminding us we weren’t alone. “How about we think of good ol’ Nigel’s now that we’ve cleared up whatever insanity that ghost of Giving Days Past was or whatever. Why don’t we all sit down and have a level-headed discussion about how we can all benefit from this business plan—”

“Quiet,” I snapped as I thundered over to the conniving weasel. I snatched up the fallen flower and shoved it at Nigel until he recoiled under the table he was bound to. “I don’t want to hear another word out of you, except where you got these flowers. Who else were you working with? Did they know about your schemes?”

“Get that thing out of my face!”

“Move it closer? Well, if you insist—”

“No! Stop!” Nigel squirmed his hands behind him, and his gift sprang to life, attempting to package up the bloom in a sheet of silver paper that appeared out of thin air. I snatched the paper and ripped it away before it could make contact with the bloom, then advanced another step. “Get away from me! I got the flowers from a shop outside of town, is that what you want to hear? I never even spoke to the owner. She’s some sort of shut-in!”

*A shut-in that sells flowers?*

“Tell the rest to the constable,” Emmett said as he grabbed a fire poker from the hearth and placed it in my hand. “Evalie, are you all right with watching him while I fetch help?”

“All right? I might even enjoy it,” I said with a wicked smile as I watched Nigel eye the iron poker. “What an entertaining gift, Emmett. How thoughtful of you.”

.....

The constable arrived quickly, bringing along a few patrolling soldiers from the capital. We handed over all the flowers as evidence and explained my unwilling involvement in the entire scheme. The constable found it easy to call me blameless since I was openly handing over every piece of evidence. Plus, Nigel’s delivery wagon with the rest of the poisoned flowers was parked around the back. However, none of the evidence stopped Nigel from trying to craft stories about how I was some sort of mastermind.

“It’s all her! She’s crazy!” Nigel shouted as the soldiers bound his wrists. “She was even talking to an invisible man earlier! You have to believe me, this was all her doing!”

“Uh-huh, tell us more about this *invisible man*.” The constable rolled his eyes as he huffed a snowflake from his nose. We all stood out in the snow, watching as Nigel loaded into the barred wagon to face the kingdom’s judge after the Day of Giving passed. “While you’re at it, why don’t you tell us about the little elves you saw running around, too.” He laughed.

“It was a man, not an elf! And *she* saw him, not me!” Nigel spat in my direction, but I didn’t give him the satisfaction of confirming his story. Alfie didn’t need to get dragged into this, though it did sting to pretend he’d never existed.

I pressed a hand to my heart, feeling my magic flicker like Alfie was smiling from inside me. He was still with me. I may have been unable to bring him to life like before, but he would always be part of my gift.

“I’m sorry, Evalie.” Emmett draped his coat over my shoulders, then placed a gentle hand on my back. “I’m sure you miss him.” He lowered his voice as he guided me back toward the doorway where we could still watch the action but at least be out of the wind. “If I could have gone longer without breaking the illusion for you, I would have. He may have been a creation of your magic, but I can see he was so much more than that.”

I gave him a tearful smile as the first drop of moisture streaked my cheek. It meant a lot to hear Emmett appreciate Alfie for who he was instead of *what* he was. Emmett wiped the tear from my cheek, and I leaned into his touch, pulling him into an embrace. He felt so cold without his coat on. Warming him up was the least I could do.

“He was a lot like you,” I said, earning a curious look from Emmett. “Alfie was his own individual, but I think he was also made up of all the people closest to me. I can’t explain it, but he was like a mirror, trying to show me the best parts of others and the parts of myself I needed to fix. He had my mother’s magic and kindness, my lack of self-worth and stubbornness, and he was overflowing with your tenderness and willingness to help. Getting to know Alfie helped me recognize the blessings I already had and all the ways I needed to work on appreciating them.”

“He sounds like a clever man.” Emmett smiled as he looked down at me with an adoring gaze that was something Alfie never could have mirrored. “Maybe I should have tried to get to know him better.”

“It might have been a bit of a one-sided conversation,” I giggled, feeling like the space between us was suddenly much too far. “Thank you for being the one to tell me the truth and for being here for me all along. Your presence alone has been such a gift, Emmett. One that I have been taking for granted for far too long. I should have seen you so much sooner, but seeing a fake man was what made me realize the realest one of all was already here.”

He pulled me closer, slowly, like he was reeling me in and didn’t want me to startle away. My pulse quickened with each inch closer he got, but I didn’t dream of pulling away.

“It was a little hard competing with a fake.” Emmett laughed under his breath. “But seeing you be happy again was all I needed. I don’t have any magic, but I will always gift you everything I am, Evalie.”

*So much magic from a supposedly giftless man.*

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of such a powerful gift.” My voice grew airy. He brushed his thumb against my cheek, raising the hair on the back of my neck. “And here I thought you were weak. How long have you been holding out on me?” I teased.

He braced his fingers under my chin, lifting it up to let his gaze settle on my lips. His thumb caressed my bottom lip, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Far, far too long,” he breathed, then a second later, his lips came crashing down on mine. All the touch I’d been craving was satisfied as I threw my arms around his neck and pulled him even closer. My magic burst throughout my blood like fireworks, causing illusions of colored lights and golden garlands to scatter across the front of the shop. I could have kissed him all night, but we eventually had to pull apart to come up for air.

We held each other for another long moment, the first light of sun cresting over the trees and warming my flushed cheeks. Snowflakes clung to my eyelashes,



making my blinks heavy and reminding me that I'd been up all night long. Emmett's embrace felt more comfortable than a goose-feather pillow, and I nearly collapsed peacefully in his arms until the constable came back over.

"Pardon me, Miss Makera." He cleared his throat, and I grudgingly pulled away from Emmett. "I just had a few more questions to ask you, if that's all right."

"Yes, of course," I said, giving Emmett a *we'll pick this up later* smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, you see, Mr. Nigel's claims of your involvement in the crime have seemed far-fetched for the most part, but I'm afraid a new piece of information has made things a bit sticky," the constable said, pressing his chapped lips together.

"Sticky?" Emmett joined in. "What rubbish did he tell you? Evalie has been operating on the assumption that these flowers came from her late mother's lingering gift in the shop. She never once invited Nigel into her home." Emmett repeated the tale we'd told the soldiers. It wasn't entirely truthful, but it was better than trying to explain Alfie's existence.

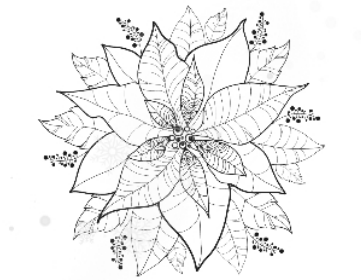
"Which would make sense..." The constable trailed off, his bushy eyebrows squashing together as he struggled with his next words. He looked up at me, searching my eyes for any malice, but only giving me a pitying look that made my heart beat faster. "...if your mother was truly deceased."

The numbness that spread through me could have made me immune to a fiery inferno. My eyes went so wide they nearly popped out of my head, and the beating in my chest completely ceased as I waited for the constable to correct his mistake.

"W-what?" I choked. "S-sorry, but she *is* deceased. She was buried over a month ago."

"Evangeline Makera?" The constable repeated my mother's name, causing every muscle in my body to tighten. "No, dear, she's living on the outskirts of town selling the same flowers this crook has been placing in your shop. Admittedly, her identity was only confirmed a few days ago. She's a Jane Doe who suffered memory loss after a terrible illness."

## Chapter Twenty-Four



*One day later.*

*The Day of Giving.*

*She hadn't died.*

I stood outside the small stone cottage, my eyes already tearing up at the hundreds of red flowers lining the snowy front yard. They were beautiful, their bright-red color blanketing the white snow like the candy stripes of a peppermint. The sweet scent of the blooms filled my head with memories of Alfie and then memories of Mother growing this exact flower every year on her birthday.

*"Why do you like this flower so much, Mama?" I asked as she admired the delicate star-shaped flowers. "Aren't roses or daffodils prettier? They always seem to sell the best in the shop."*

*"I love roses and daffodils," Mother said with the most beautiful smile in the world. "Roses represent love, and daffodils represent good fortune, but this... This is a poinsettia, and it represents celebration and good cheer."*

A poinsettia... I'd forgotten they had such a beautiful name.

*"Oh! Is that why you grow them on your birthday? To celebrate?" I asked eagerly.*

*"Yes, but they're also my favorite flower for another reason." Mother lowered the poinsettia so it was at my eye level. "Did you know everyone has a birth flower for the month they were born in? It's kind of like a birthstone. This flower is for December."*

*"December?" I wrinkled my nose, trying to figure out why she would pick a December flower when her birthday was in June. "Wait...that's when my birthday is!"*

*"Exactly." Mother beamed. "The month I received the greatest gift of all is the month I always want to remember and celebrate."*

I brushed the petals of one of the poinsettias, my heart aching as the word *remember* pulsed through my brain. She'd been here all along. Trying to remember someone but not knowing how.

The same doctor who had sent us an empty casket and declared my mother dead ended up being the man who was giving Nigel access to red-fever patients so he could use his gift to package the virus. Mother's memory loss had made her the perfect candidate to collect samples from and pass off to Nigel. She still had enough remnants of the virus to be stolen and dispersed but was *gone* enough that the doctor assumed he could mark her off as deceased.

I'd been mourning someone who was only an hour's walk away. She had never been dead; she was simply lost, but I didn't know how much of her remained. How much of her memory had the fever deteriorated?

"Do you want me to go in with you?" Emmett asked, his soft voice calming my nerves as he patiently watched me admire the flowers.

"That's all right." I straightened, turning my attention to the closed door that housed the woman I had ached for so many nights. She didn't have to remember me. She didn't even have to act the same; just seeing that she was alive was more than my heart could have asked for after so much grief. "I want to talk to her alone first."

"Of course." Emmett smiled. "I'll be right here if you need me."

I took an icy breath, my lungs quivering from the cold as I tugged my cloak tighter. Never in my life had I imagined a season could be filled with so much pain and joy. By losing the dearest person to me, I'd created a man to fill in the gaps left in my heart. Those gaps then overflowed and showed me just how loved and supported I had been from the start. I'd thought I was ready to heal from the loss of my mother, yet once again, I was receiving another gift. She may not recognize me or even know my name, but she was here, and she was better than any present wrapped in a bow.

One step at a time, I approached the door, leaving a lone pair of snowy footprints behind me.

With soft taps, I knocked on the door, my knuckles feeling as fragile as glass. I held my breath, and the soft sound of shuffling echoed from inside.

"Come in."

*It's her. It's her voice.*

Tears clustered in my eyes, but I swallowed them back and composed myself as much as possible. My lips wobbled, and my throat was completely closed up, but the joy pouring out of me was only seconds away from bursting through.

I opened the door, the soft creak muffling every other sound as I opened it to a room bursting with the same red blooms. Poinsettias were stacked on every shelf, spilling out of corners, balanced on tables, and filling the room with the most beautiful bursts of red.

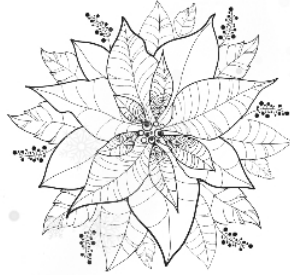
A pair of warm brown eyes met me from across the room. She was sitting in a rocking chair, a pot of soil in her lap and her hand waving above a tiny sprout that was barely germinated. She froze, the pot almost sliding off her lap until she looked down at the bloom and then back over at me.

"Hello, Mother." Tears poured down my cheeks, streaming across my bursting smile. "I missed you."

She stood up, her eyes wide and hand clutched over her heart. Her gift filled the room, and every flower bloomed a bit wider as she took in a soul-warming gasp.

"Evalie?"

## Epilogue



*One year later.*

The scent of freshly baked cinnamon rolls flooded the house, rousing my appetite and making me set the table even faster. I placed a tall poinsettia in the center of the table, then focused my magic on it to make the petals stretch out and sparkle with golden light. The red flowers all over the place took up half of the space in the crowded shop, filling the room with color and holiday cheer.

“Want to add another to the table?” Emmett slid up beside me with another flower pot cradled in his arms. “This one was sitting in my chair, and I would prefer not to stand while eating.”

Mother laughed at him as she pulled the fresh tray of cinnamon rolls out of the woodfire oven. “Why not take it to your shop and sell it there? You might have better luck with some of them than we did this year.”

“Are you kidding?” Emmett laughed. “After what Nigel did last year, no one is going anywhere near these flowers. It took long enough to get the townsfolk to trust the shop again after I took it over. Throwing one of these flowers in the window would be like putting a carrot on the shelf at a butcher shop.”

“What are you trying to say about my flowers?” Mother gave him a stern look, her red lips twisted with a challenging smile.

“That they’re an omen for red fever,” Emmett said unapologetically, meeting her challenge with a smirk. He plopped his flower next to mine, shifting them together so they looked symmetrical on the decorated table. “I mean, come on. You sold out of *holly* bushes this year. Holly bushes are *actually* poisonous.”

“Hmm, is that so? What a pity, I made holly-flavored cinnamon rolls.” Mother nibbled her nail with a worried look at the baked goods.

“Wait, you did?” Emmett walked around the table to inspect the piping tray.

“Well, only one of them,” Mother said. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure it ends up on just your plate.”

“Hey! Why not put it on Evalie’s plate?” Emmett huffed.

“Why drag me into this?” I peeked around the flowers.

“Because I haven’t annoyed you yet today.” Emmett shrugged. “I felt the itch.”

“Well, go itch somewhere else. I’m trying to have a nice holiday,” I said with a humorous glare.

Mother laughed, then turned her attention to the bubbling pot of cider steaming over the fire. She tossed a few slices of oranges in the pot, then a full cinnamon stick that immediately perfumed the room. I’d never thought I’d have a Day of Giving like this again after last year, let alone one that was better. Emmett had essentially become part of the family ever since Mother returned home. The constable seized Nigel’s shop after his crimes were confirmed, so I used the money I’d earned from the poisoned flowers to let Emmett buy it back. It was a bit of an excessive gift for the holiday, but he was well worth it.

I didn’t need all the money anyway. I had everything I could have ever wanted already within my grasp.

I laughed as Mother scolded Emmett for sneaking a lick of the cinnamon roll icing. I half expected him to stick his finger in the boiling cider to sneak a lick next, but instead, he wandered over to the stash of gifts we’d left by the fire.

“Evalie, want to step outside with me for a few minutes before your mother attacks me with a ladle?” Emmett asked as he plucked one of the adorably wrapped gifts from under the mantle.

“Outside? But it’s snowing.” I looked out the window at the perfect white canvas that blanketed the world outside. It looked beautiful, but I knew it would be freezing.

“It will just be for a minute,” Emmett persuaded me as he gave my mother a sly smile that seemed a bit suspicious.

“Go ahead. I need some space to finish carving up the ham,” Mother said as she twirled a knife in her long fingers. “Why don’t you give Emmett your gift while you’re outside? I know you’ve been excited to finally give it to him.”

I looked over at the present I’d wrapped a full year ago, my heart fluttering as I remembered finding it in the closet after nearly forgetting about it.

“Ooh, you got me something?” Emmett rubbed his hands together eagerly, plucking the present from the pile. “Is it a cinnamon roll?”

“Would you really want me to wrap that?” I asked as I grabbed my cloak from the hook.

“No, but that doesn’t mean I’d be mad if you did.”

“Just go outside, you two.” Mother laughed as she pointed toward the door with her knife. “When you get too cold to feel your nose, you can come back in so we can eat.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Emmett saluted, then pulled open the door with a rush of chilly air.

I stepped onto the front stoop, trying not to shiver immediately from the brisk wind. The trees were beautiful, layered with thick blankets of snow and glittering icicles reflecting the sun’s rays. Emmett handed me my gift and kept the one labeled for him in his grasp. I took the tiny present. It was no bigger than an apple and decorated with dark-green paper and a red bow.

“I think it’s only right that I go first, considering how long it’s been since you wrapped this one.” Emmett winked.

“What makes you think it’s been long since I wrapped it?” I scrunched my nose, wondering how he would have noticed the gift’s age.

“The newsprint wrapping is dated from last year.”

*Oh...*

I felt my cheeks flush, but he only chuckled as he tore the paper off in strips. The second he uncovered the gloves, I remembered how plain they were without my magic. The simple leather gloves looked as new as the day I’d bought them, and despite being free of magic, Emmett beamed upon seeing them.

“These look amazing!” he said as he immediately started to put them on. “I’ve been needing a new pair of gloves. Thank you, Evalie. This is so thoughtful.”

My blush softened, but there was more I wanted to give him than just a useful pair of gloves. “There’s more, give me your hands.” I motioned for his palms, and he gave me an odd look but reached out for me to touch his new gloves. I closed my eyes and let my magic flow through the leather, picturing all the joy of the season and the love I felt for the man in front of me.

“Whoa...” Emmett gasped as he looked down at the detailed artwork that painted his gift. The leather had turned a dark green, with red poinsettias and white snowflakes decorating each knuckle. “This is incredible.”

“And if you want them to stay that way, you’ll need to keep bringing them back to me.” I smiled. “Whenever they fade, just ask me to hold your hand.”

His smile broadened, and I felt butterflies flutter in my stomach as he gleefully curled and uncurled his fingers.

“I love it,” he said, his voice softening. “But I think they’re starting to fade a little bit... maybe you should give me your hand.”

“Very funny.” I rolled my eyes.

He pointed toward the gift he’d given me, his expression far from teasing as he drowned me in one of his adoring gazes. “I’m not joking. Why don’t you open your present and find out why.”

*What? What is he talking about?*

Curiosity got the better of me, and I tore open the paper on the box and lifted up the lid. My breath caught, freezing in the back of my throat as I looked down at the polished gold ring inside.

“Emmett... What is—” The sound of crunching snow caught my ear, and I looked up from the ring to see Emmett kneeling in the snow.

“Evalie Dianne Makera, will you give me your hand?” He held out his gloved hand, his eyes pouring into mine with a love I couldn’t possibly describe. My body was shaking, my heart pounding so hard I thought it would burst free and claim him if I didn’t do it myself.

I reached for his hand, my bare fingers settling into the stiff leather. “Yes...” I squeezed the box in my hand. “Yes, Emmett! Yes!”

He jumped to his feet, and I threw myself into his arms. My magic burst through my veins, causing the falling snow to sparkle like the glitter inside a shaken snow globe. Emmett hooked a finger under my chin and brought his lips to mine, his frosty kiss heating me from the inside out.

“Best gift ever,” he whispered against my lips, sending a ripple down my spine as he pulled me in for another kiss.

When we finally pulled apart, my magic was still running wild. The glittering snow was now sparkling with every color in the rainbow, and the icicles reflected the colors of an aurora borealis.

"I think even my gift agrees," I laughed as he pulled me to his side, and we watched the beauty of my magic together.

It was breathtaking. The joy I felt was practically tangible, filling the world with colors, light, and so much beauty. My gift grew stronger as Emmett placed the ring on my finger, and right when I thought my magic couldn't create anything more wonderful, a figure caught my eye in the distance.

*A man?*

"Emmett? Do you see that over there?" I pointed toward the figure walking toward us, his silhouette growing more familiar the closer he got.

"See what?" Emmett followed my gaze. "The snow? It really is beautiful, isn't it?"

"No, not the snow. There's a—" I took in a sharp breath, my entire body sparking to life as the warm amber eyes I'd said goodbye to over a year ago came into view.

*Alfie...is that you?*

He left no footprints, but he looked as real as I remembered him. He only came up to the front of the shop's walkway, stopping before coming any closer as he met my gaze.

His tussled hair was cleaner than I remembered, combed back and trimmed neatly. His clothes were no longer patched with holes; instead, he wore a warm red coat with green trousers and a matching vest. I looked down where his feet defied gravity over top of the snow.

*The boots...he's wearing the boots I gifted him.*

My heart glowed as he simply looked up at me and gave me the purest smile I could have ever pictured. He looked at Emmett, who still hadn't seen him, and gave him an approving nod that melted me faster than a snowball in a fire. He gave me one last loving look, the kind you'd give a friend you would always love, no matter how far apart life took you.

Then he turned around and walked back through the snow without any evidence that he'd ever been there.

"Was there something else you wanted me to see?" Emmett squeezed my hand, and I turned back to look at the man I loved with my entire heart.

The best gift that had been real from the start.

"Just this," I said, leaning forward and giving him a perfect holiday kiss.

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